FORMER GIRL SOLDIERS IN COLOMBIA: YOUNG VOICES THAT
NEED TO BE HEARD

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
April 2014

DEDICATION

My master's thesis is the result of six months of sharing time with an extraordinary group of girls who unfortunately experienced a portion of their life as a child soldier in Colombia. I am grateful to them for their engagement and excitement while sharing their stories. I dedicate my work to these amazing individuals who decided to tell the world who they were, who they are and how they envision their future.

I also dedicate the completion of my master's thesis to my parents, sisters and closest friends, who have played such an important role throughout the entire process. Thanks to their support, their patience, their love and their understanding I was enabled to finish this important achievement in my professional career. The dedication goes to my Canadian family as well, who I met at the final stage of this process. They offered me a home away from home and quickly became an important source of emotional support during the final days of the writing of my thesis.

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A ustedes muchas gracias.

¡Los llevo en el corazón!

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ABSTRACT

The exclusion of girls is an issue of great concern when studying the impact of war on individuals in any country affected by armed conflicts. Colombia, for instance, is currently facing an armed conflict and dealing with the issue of child soldiers' recruitment. This country was the research site of the present study whose main focus was the experiences that girls lived before, during and after their lives as soldiers. Drawing on the Human Security and Gender and Development theoretical frameworks, the main goal of this research was to explore how girl soldiers' experiences shaped their agency. As it will be demonstrated, girls are not passive individuals, but agents of their own development. They want to participate in the healing of their past, as well as in the transformation of their present and their future; therefore their voices should be heard.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

ACR	Colombian Agency for Reintegration
CAE	Specialised Attention Centre
CAR	Central African Republic
CEH	Commission for Historical Clarification
CNMH	Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica
CONPES	National Council on Economic and Social Policy
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ELN	Ejército de Liberación Nacional
EPL	Ejército Popular de Liberación
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia
FPL	Fuerzas Populares de Liberación
FMLN	Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional
FSLN	Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional
GAD	Gender and Development
ICBF	Colombian Family Welfare Institute
HDR	Human Development Report
HSN	Human Security Network
ICISS	International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
M-19	Movimiento 19 de Abril
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
POTI	Peace Operations Training Institute
R2P	Responsibility to Protect
SENA	National Learning Service
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
URNG	Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CHAPTER 1   INTRODUCTION

While it is essential to recognise the victimisation of women and girls in conflict, experiences demonstrate that they can also be a source of violence and assume active roles in state and non-state armed groups as perpetrators. Although there are circumstances in which they are forced to participate in war, in many cases they express it is their choice. Therefore females cannot be treated exclusively as victims of conflicts, but as peace destabilising elements as well. While performing as combatants, women's experiences in conflict are diverse. Even though some of their behaviors are shaped by traditional gender roles, the danger of conflicts also makes them break traditions and adopt different roles that influence their social interactions with men and other women. It is precisely in extreme situations like these that they exercise their agency in very creative ways, sometimes with the only aim of surviving.

Some figures can illustrate the landscape of women's and girls' participation in armed conflicts: according to McKay and Mazurana (2004) between 70% and 80% of the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army) from Northern Uganda were child soldiers; girls represented 30% of the forces (p. 29). The situation was similar in Angola. However, from the 30,000 demobilised individuals, only 0.2% corresponded to female ex-combatants. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) was not an exception either. Approximately 18,345 ex-combatants demobilised, but only 304 individuals were females, according to the official records that authorities tracked (MDRP & UNIFEM 2005, as cited in Cohn, 2013, p. 203). Latin America is also a region where conflicts arose and women became key actors in the armed groups. Dyan Mazurana and Linda Eckerbom Cole (2013), highlight that "many armed groups contained a significant proportion, up to 30% in some cases, and females within these armed groups had joined voluntarily" (p. 204). Maxine Molyneux (1985), confirmed the figure in the specific case of Nicaragua, where women and girls represented around 30% of the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional) guerrilla group (p. 227).

Within the category of female soldiers, as a population group, girl soldiers represent an important subgroup whose lives before getting involved in armed forces and their experiences as soldiers have been poorly analysed or completely ignored. Both McKay and Mazurana (2004) indicate that girl soldiers' conditions are rarely studied

from perspectives that consider the specificities of their context: time period, region, country, armed conflict, or culture. Furthermore, the different long-term effects on their bodies and their emotions are overlooked, as well as their interactions with men, boys, women, and other girls (p. 18). Consequently, when they have the chance to leave the armed groups, the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) processes they undergo frequently disregard the needs and expectations that derived from their past experiences. As highlighted by Coulter (2009) and stated by Save the Children's report in 2005 "the international community has failed countless thousands of girls by consistently ignoring their particular needs" (p. 157). The main critique of this report had to do with "the underfunding of projects aimed at girl soldiers and the poor and inflexible planning and implementation of DDR processes" (p. 157).

When states and international agencies implement DDR programs, they lead processes in which former combatants lay down arms, are separated from the military life, and receive support to socially and economically reintegrate into society (UNDDR 2006a, p. 6 as cited in Mazurana & Eckerbom Cole, 2013, p. 197). Unfortunately, previous experiences of DDR processes demonstrate that men have been the main recipients of the benefits of these programs, while women and children have remained excluded. According to Coulter (2009) DDR processes are usually designed and implemented by officials who see combatants and men as synonymous (p. 156).

The reality of child soldiers was made public before the international community during the peace-building process in Mozambique. At the time, the participation of women in armed groups was acknowledged, but "the use of girls was widely denied or dismissed as infrequent. No specific postconflict programs were developed for girls, and gender considerations in children's programs were nearly nonexistent" (McKay & Mazurana 2004, p. 32), despite the key roles they played as soldiers. Some authors (Stavrou, 2004; McKay & Mazurana 2004; Denov & Maclure, 2005; Denov, 2006; Denov & Gervais 2007; Cohn 2013) argue that girls and women in armed groups perform domestic activities and at the same time, support the group militarily as frontline fighters, spies, and explosive experts. Notwithstanding, policy makers and DDR planners frequently ignore the diversity of their roles in the armed groups. In the study of girl soldiers in Angola, Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda, Denov (2008)

stated that since girls' roles as soldiers were not recognised, the process of reintegration into society for them was spontaneous. They had to go back and try to fit in their communities or, in the case of the internally displaced, to fit in camps. They did this without the professional support that could help them to assimilate to the huge change that involved leaving behind a military life and becoming a civilian. As a consequence, the DDR programs prolonged the human insecurity of these girls during the postconflict process (p. 825). Given that female combatants also support the operations of armed groups logistically and militarily, as men do, it is relevant to take into account their own experiences, needs and expectations, and include a differential treatment in their process of reintegration into society. The final goal is to achieve a successful and sustainable return to a civilian life in which women's and girls' state of vulnerability is positively transformed. Since the complexity of armed conflicts impacts the whole society, the design of any strategy in postconflict reconstruction - such as DDR programs - should include all communities' needs and evaluate their expectations.

Certainly, the exclusion of women and girls is an issue of great concern when studying the impact of war on individuals in any country affected by armed conflicts. Colombia is one of the states which is currently facing an armed conflict and dealing with the issue of child soldiers' recruitment. This country was the research site of the present study whose main focus was girl soldiers. The main incentive for conducting the research in Colombia derived from the connection that I have to the research site as a Colombian citizen. My personal experience as a Colombian, my interest in the process of the armed conflict that still remains there, as well as my willingness to participate in the national peacebuilding efforts motivated me to conduct the research.

Girl soldiers in the Colombian context

It is relevant to indicate that the recruitment of children into non-state armed forces is a serious problem in Colombia, and is the result of the internal armed conflict that arose in the early 1960's and continues today. The irregular armed forces that for decades have recruited, and continue recruiting children are the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), and the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), also known as paramilitary groups. More recently, criminal gangs directly associated to drug trafficking cartels began to recruit minors as well.

Although these groups' structures are weaker today, the complex dynamic of the conflict has resulted in a significant increase of child soldiers' recruitment.

According to the Paris Principles (2007), which are standards that guide the work of National Human Rights Institutions, a child soldier is "any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity […] as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes" (p.7). Based on this definition, which recognises the diverse roles that boys and girls may play into an armed group, Natalia Springer (2012) states that, at present, around 18,000 children make up part of the guerrilla groups and the criminal gangs which mainly operate in urban areas in Colombia. While the trend is escalating because these organisations continue to recruit children, the number of minors who manage to escape from non-state armed groups or are apprehended by the National Army and then join the DDR process is also increasing. Between 1999 and 2011, 1,293 girls and 3,395 boys got into the Colombian DDR program for children. On average, 110 girls join the program every year (ICBF, 2011, as cited in CNMH, 2013, p. 75). Compared to the number of child soldiers who are recruited, the total of minors who demobilise is low. Nevertheless, it is important to take into account that the desertion from any of these groups is a life and death decision that children have to make, and only few successfully escape (Springer, 2012, p. 26).

The life experiences of this vulnerable population leave traumatic memories and feelings that are not easily overcome. Thus, the government faces the significant challenge of analysing strategies to create and implement DDR programs. The National Government commitment is notable during the last years and very positive changes have been made. The situation was not the same before. One example is the massive paramilitary demobilisation process carried out in Colombia between 2003 and 2006. This process did not include specific protocols for children's demobilisation, despite the information collected in previous investigations, which indicated that three from every ten AUC combatants were under eighteen years of age (Springer, 2012, p. 53). After this unfortunate event and some others that took place before, the national authorities joined efforts to articulate and formalise a program which better met the needs of these children.

Unfortunately, the inclusion of former girl soldiers in the DDR program, as a particular group of victims whose experiences, needs and expectations differ from those of boys, does not represent a topic of real concern in the Colombian peacebuilding process yet. Some legal advances have been made, but not all the institutional policies are effectively reflected at a practice level, because of lack of commitment and synchronisation among national institutions. Some of the legal instruments that support the work of the state institutions on the assistance of child soldiers are as follows:

- Law 418 of 1997 grants the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF by its acronym in Spanish) the responsibility for the attention to children who were involved in armed groups (ODDR, 2011, p. 4).

- Law 782 of 2002 gives these children the status of victims of the armed conflict; moreover, states that the ICBF must create a special program for the attention to the needs of demobilised children (ODDR, 2009, p. 14).

- Law 448 of 2011, which is the Victims and Land Restitution Law, dictates measures for attention, assistance and reparation of victims of the armed conflict. It highlights the necessity of having a differential treatment that address the needs of minority groups such as children and women (Serrano-Murcia, 2013, p. 53).

- CONPES 3554 of 2008. The National Council on Economic and Social Policy (CONPES by its acronym in Spanish) defined the Social and Economic Reintegration National Policy for children and adults. It stated that when minors who are undergoing the reintegration program under the guardianship of the ICBF turn 18 years of age, they can continue their process with the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR by its acronym in Spanish) (ODDR, 2011, p. 6).

- CONPES 161 of 2013 portrays the commitment of the state regarding the inclusion of gender analysis in their plans of action in favor of demobilised women and girls (CONPES 161, 2013, p. 5).

All these instruments are undoubtedly valuable in the step-by-step Colombian process for pursuing peace. Since the last collective demobilisation was in 2006, during the last years, national authorities have only been receiving boys, girls, men and women who individually demobilise. This situation has allowed the state to follow a slow learning process in relation to the mechanisms and strategies to assist demobilised

people. Nonetheless, time is running out and important steps on the peacebuilding process such as the peace negotiations with the FARC, and the possible peace talks with the ELN may result in collective demobilisation agreements. Therefore, Colombia must be prepared to lead a sustainable postconflict process where ex-combatants, not only men, but also women, boys and girls, play a key role. Children cannot be overlooked in the Colombian peace agreements, as has been the case of other peace agreements in other regions. Unfortunately, "since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, 185 peace agreements have been signed between warring parties. Of these, only nine contained specific provisions for child combatants" (The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, 2013a, p. 16)

Although the recognition of demobilised minors in general as agents of their own development and crucial participants in the Colombian peacebuilding process is essential, the key point that makes this research relevant is the fact that girls do not still have a differential treatment in this process. CONPES 161 of 2013 is probably the law that has most specific guidelines regarding women's and girls' rights. However, it is still a very recent law, and therefore the results are not seen yet. The legal instruments are at the institutions' disposal, but these policies and guidelines have not resulted in effective practical steps against girls' exclusion. Girls should be considered, not as passive individuals, but as agents of their own development. For that reason their voices should be heard. For all these reasons and aiming to contribute to the debate on the impact that armed conflicts have on Colombian girl soldiers, I explored how the experiences of girls, before, during and after their lives as soldiers, shaped their agency, and how the Colombian DDR program was responding to their new changes, needs and expectations.

Conceptual framework

Girl soldiers' recruitment and their reintegration process has been approached by academics of diverse discipline backgrounds. In this specific research, this social issue will be analysed through the lens of Human Security and Gender and Development. Human Security, whose foundational ideas came from the Human Development approach, is a framework which moved from a state-centric view, to a people-centric focus. Human Security points out that states should consider the protection of individuals and the encouragement of their capacities and freedoms as their main priorities, instead of

having national security and the protection of national territories as primary goals. Through this framework, national and international institutions would design policies that address security issues in each country, making sure that individuals become the primary beneficiaries (Jolly & Basu Ray, 2006, p. 5). "As a result, state security becomes a direct reflection of the perception of the security of the state's citizens" (p. 5).

Mahbub ul Haq made public the concept of Human Security as "freedom from fear and freedom from want" (The United Nations, 2009, p.17) in the 1994 Human Development Report. Permeated by these new ideas, governments in coutries such as Canada, Japan and Norway included Human Security ideas in their foreign policies. Moreover, the United Nations began to reformulate its peacekeeping strategies with the aim of going beyond the mere end of war confrontations and having a more active role on peacebuilding in postconflict processes. In this sense, Denov (2006) highlights the fact that the Brahimi Report on UN Peacekeeping Operations makes reference to demobilisation and reintegration as relevant mechanisms for postconflict stability (United Nations 2000, as cited in Denov, 2006, p. 330). She points out that "given its focus on both protection and peacebuilding, DDR represents an important aspect of the human security agenda" (p. 330).

The UN state members showed commitment to Human Security in the 2005 World Summit, in which they declared that "all individuals, in particular vulnerable people, are entitled to freedom from fear and freedom from want, with an equal opportunity to enjoy all their rights and fully develop their human potential" (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, n.d., para. 4). In this summit, the world leaders agreed to work on three main matters: "the establishment of a Peacebuilding Commission […], a new Council for Human Rights […], and the principle of the responsibility to protect [R2P] and the right to intervene" (Jolly & Basu Ray, 2006, p. 5).

The emphasis that Human Security places on vulnerable people is the main aspect to highlight, since women and children, and so girl soldiers, are considered a vulnerable group whose rights are constantly violated. The mission of Human Security is to protect the most vulnerable population from physical threats and deprivation (Fox, 2004, p. 475). Regarding the protection of children, Shelly Whitman (2012) reflects on the need to consider the use of children by armed groups from the perspective of R2P. She argues

that when addressing the child soldier problem, it is also relevant to count on the international community's responsibility to protect. That is to say the responsibility to prevent both armed conflicts and the use of children as soldiers; to react when children are being the target of armed groups; and to rebuild the society when an armed conflict ends (pp. 153-160). Moreover, authors such as Fox (2004) and Denov (2006) recognise the relevance of Human Security when studying the issue of child soldiers' recruitment. Fox (2004), for instance, notes that based on Human Security policies, programs like DDR could better address girls' needs that have been frequently overlooked in postconflict processes (p. 476).

However, a gap in this framework appears when arguments are required to justify the importance of the analysis of girls, as a very specific group of people whose experiences, capacities and freedoms differ from the ones of boys, and who, consequently, also have divergent needs and expectations. According to Denov (2006), Human Security is a gender neutral framework and that is one of the reasons why DDR programs, although intend to improve the security and human dignity of individuals, do not make any difference between males and females (p.337). Taking this into account, it was necessary to consider an additional framework which might offer theoretical instruments which facilitated the analysis of the contexts of women, men, boys, and girls live and how social structures shape their relationships. That is precisely the focus of Gender and Development (GAD), a feminist approach that looks at the social structures that inevitably influence human's behavior. It "emphasizes the need to challenge existing gender roles and relations" (Reeves & Baden, 2000, p. 33) among men and women. Instead of seeing women in isolation, GAD looks at them in a wider spectrum in which agency and empowerment become essential.

The analysis of gender roles is critical when it comes to study men, women, boys and girls interactions before, during and after war. There is a common categorisation of women as pacifist individuals and keepers of home, hence as victims of conflicts (Dietrich, 2009, p. 160), whereas men are considered warriors and perpetrators. When women are seen as victims and their role as perpetrators is ignored, their motivations, desires and ambitions when participating in war are completely overlooked. They are not treated as individuals able to make choices, express themselves and transform traditional

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social relationships in the context they live. Their agency is denied. In this regard, Carol Cohn (2013) argues that the woman/victim dichotomy is false. Although she recognises the traumatising experiences women have in war, she also draws attention to the resourcefulness of these women to cope with their war experiences and improve their situations (p. 31). Denov and Gervais (2002) present similar conclusions regarding former girl soldiers: "with their experience of agency, negotiation, resistance, and resourcefulness [these girls] are undoubtedly equipped with incredible potential to contribute to projects of reconstruction, peace, development, and security in the future" (p. 906). That is why it would be more important to reflect on the "challenges and opportunities that women [and girls] confront, and the agency they have and constraints they face" (Cohn, 2013, p. 32).

Agency becomes a key element in this research. Although there are different definitions of this concept, the most appropriate definition in contexts of war is provided by Long (1992) and cited by Moser and Clark (2005). According to Long, agency is "the capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion" (p.5). Not only do female adults have the capacity to reflect on their experiences and make the choices they think are convenient; girls also display a great capacity to cope with life, survive and reconstruct their lives the way they desire. Some of them go beyond and realise that they can also positively impact the life of others, as agents of development, they take actions to make a wider social impact. They begin to take on roles that are close to what an empowerment process entails: control of available resources and influence on social structures with the aim of undoing negative constructions that undermine individuals' and communities' development (Rowlands, 1997, p. 14). It demands "individual change and collective action" (Young 1988, as cited in Rowlands, 1997, p. 26), for this reason, the analysis of the responses that national institutions are given to girls' redefinition of roles is relevant to conclude whether or not the state is contributing to the empowerment process of ex-girl soldiers.

Research site and methods

This study's fieldwork took place at the Centro de Atención Especializada (CAE) - or Specialised Attention Centre - an institution designated by the Instituto de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF) – or Colombian Family Welfare Institute - to look after approximately

45 demobilised children in the city of Medellin, Colombia. The CAE belongs to a multilevel network in which entities such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Protection, the International Organisation for Migration, the Colombian Family Welfare Institute, the Human Rights Ombudsman, the Colombian Agency for Reintegration and Developing Minds - a foundation with whom CAE engaged in an international cooperation agreement - directly or indirectly support and monitor its work. Even though there are three separate CAE's in Colombia, this research was only conducted in the CAE located in Medellin. Thirteen former girl soldiers between 14 and 18 years old, under the legal protection of the ICBF, participated in this research. The girls assigned by the ICBF to this location came from diverse regions of the country, mostly from rural areas.

The research was conducted using qualitative methods: document analysis, observations, semi-structured interviews and visual methods. Through document analysis, I collected and analysed the main policies and regulations on child soldiers and DDR programs at national and international levels. Through the observations I had the opportunity to get familiar with the contexts in which girls interacted - school, vocational trainings, the CAE, family events and field trips - and understand their behaviours in those different settings. During the first weeks, I conducted passive observations, so I did not have any kind of interaction with them, although they knew what my role was, since the first day I arrived. Once I became familiar with the context, I started getting involved with the girls' regular activities. Observations became an interesting tool, since they included not only the analysis of girls' behaviours but also their interactions and non-verbal expressions with boys and other girls within a specific context.

Semi-structured interviews were the most effective method used to collect information. Instead of having a question-and-answer style, I established a conversation with the girls by using open-ended questions that were relevant to the research. I conducted the interviews after three months of volunteering at the CAE. Therefore, girls knew me already and my presence did not make them feel uncomfortable. Our conversations were focused on their lives before having joined an armed group, when performing as girl soldiers and their current lives in the DDR process they are undergoing. Interviews with the girls were conducted at a location at the CAE that was

private, so that they were not overheard or interrupted by others. I also interviewed some experts in the field who provided me with relevant arguments which complemented the information girls had given me.

Finally, I used body mapping, a visual method through which girls reflected and artistically expressed their ideas about life in an armed group. They were given a poster to draw a body shape. After that, they were asked to reflect on how people feel when they participate in an armed group. What kind of fears they may have, how their emotions and their physical bodies may be affected and what kind of situations they may enjoy. Since this was a group activity, no personal questions were asked. Regarding this activity, only five girls decided to participate. The others expressed unwillingness to draw; they always showed preference for speaking rather than writing or drawing. I did not insist on their participation at any moment, since I had to respect their decisions and I wanted to maintain a relationship of trust and spontaneity that promoted a space of mutual understanding. That helped me to keep the girls engaged and motivated to participate in the research. The girls were informed about my roles as a volunteer student and as a researcher, and the activities I was planning to conduct at all moments.

In order to interpret data, I classified the information collected through observations, semi-structured interviews and body mapping into three main chronological categories: before, during, and after girls' lives as soldiers. Within these three categories, I identified common elements among girls' experiences such as domestic violence, and violence outside of their homes; economic constraints, reasons to join the armed group, age, type of roles and duties, as well as trainings, penalties and other traumatic experiences they lived within the armed group. Moreover, the way they left the armed groups and their reasons to abandon them, the kind of treatment received by the national army, and the protocol followed by the national authorities for them to be registered in the DDR program. Finally the type of concerns, needs and expectations of these girls while undergoing the program, and the way the Colombian state is responding to these aspects. The analysis of this information allowed to recognise the trends directly related to my research question. These trends shed light on the topics of discussion in this thesis, through the academic lens of Human Security and Gender and Development frameworks.

The information gathered by interviewing experts in the fields and by making document analysis was useful to answer the questions that came up while interpreting data.

Ethical considerations

Taking into account that my research involved human participants and most importantly, because of the vulnerability of this specific population, the ethical considerations when doing research with children were strictly followed. These considerations were grouped in five categories: balancing inclusion and exclusion; informed consent/assent; evaluation of risks; privacy and confidentiality; and policy, regulations and guidelines (Liebenberg & Ungar 2009, p. 28). Before conducting fieldwork, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board from Dalhousie University reviewed my research project and found it to be in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. I applied to ethics review in May 2013, and received the final letter of approval on July 4th, 2013. The ethical categories are explained as follows:

Balancing inclusion and exclusion: on the one hand, according to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) (2010), children and women have been considered groups in vulnerable circumstances because of the "limited capacity, or limited access to social goods, such as rights, opportunities and power" (p. 10). In the specific case of child soldiers, their vulnerability, when they are the subject of study come from the age and the extreme experiences they live which "may compromise the ability of the individual to make a free and informed choice regarding participation" (Dalhousie University, 2012. p.9). On the other hand, when children and women are excluded from research participation, the consequent delay of knowledge production may hold back society to respond to their specific needs (CIHR, NSERC & SSHRC, 2010, p. 48).

For these reasons, finding a balance between children's protection from harm of exploitation, and the protection from harm of being excluded and silenced was essential (Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009, p.43). The fact that women and children were considered vulnerable individuals did not mean that their situation was an excuse for excluding them from research works that would minimise their condition of vulnerability. In this sense, I

followed the academic recommendations - the actions described in the next items - from experts in research with children in order to minimise risks. Three main aspects were taken into account: "minors do not have legal capacity to consent; children and adolescents may have difficulty understanding the research process; and youth may perceive that they lack power to refuse to participate" (Putman, Liss, & Landsverk, 1996, as cited in Liebenberg & Ungar 2009, p. 43).

Informed consent/assent: since children lack legal capacity to consent, I had the responsibility of requesting girls' research participation consent to their legal guardian, before conducting fieldwork. The authorisation I was provided with, stated that I was allowed to conduct research with the girls who were assigned to the Specialised Attention Center in my city of origin. Additionally, I requested girls' verbal participation assent, after having explained to them the research objectives, and the potential risks and possible benefits they could have faced if they participated. I made sure that participants understood the research and were aware that they did not have to answer questions which made them feel uncomfortable. Moreover, I emphasised that they could withdraw the project at any time.

Evaluation of risks: in terms of security, girls' participation in this research did not result in the exposure to a higher risk than the one they run as participants of the DDR program in Colombia. They were under the protection of the ICBF and lived at the CAE, where I conducted the research activities; therefore, their physical safety was not compromised. Regarding emotional risks, girls were exposed to emotional reactions when answering sensitive questions or reflecting on their own experiences during the research activities that I conducted. However, the social workers and the psychologists at the CAE were available in case of unexpected emotional reactions. Moreover, before conducting the interviews, the psychologist and I evaluated the current emotional state of some of the girls whose emotional imbalances were more accentuated. I was in constant dialogue with the girls; the trust-building period at the beginning of my fieldwork was important for them to feel comfortable with my presence. They were constantly reminded that they could stop their participation and withdraw the research whenever they wished.

Privacy and confidentiality: since girls gave personal accounts, the information was considered sensitive. To make sure that their identities were protected, I did not collect

any personal data such as personal names, e-mail addresses, telephone numbers, or names of the regions they lived or operated as child soldiers. I did not use participants' real names along the thesis narrative either; instead, I used pseudonyms to protect their identity. Additionally, I made sure that girls did not have access to any information provided by their peers, so that the risk of harming reputation of participants was minimised.

Policy, regulations and guidelines: in order to guarantee the protection of the participants, I had the responsibility of analysing and comprehending the policies, rules and guidelines that regulated research involving children and those that governed and protected children's rights.

The protection and safety of the girls was a central concern throughout this research. All research activities were conducted tactfully and placing girls' interests and most importantly, girls' dignity ahead my professional interests. Their identity and privacy were respected at all times. I deeply appreciate girls' engagement and enthusiasm when participating in this research. Their contribution made possible the work that will be presented after this first introductory chapter.

Chapter outline

The chapter structure continues with a second chapter which deepens the analysis of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks in relation to Human Security and Gender and Development as the lenses through which the girl soldiers social phenomenon can be studied. Within GAD, the concepts of agency and empowerment are specially discussed. Since it is important to have a good understanding of the contexts in which child soldiers' issues occurred and more specifically, the national context in which the girls who participated in this research lived, the third chapter presents an overview of children in conflict and a general description of the Colombian conflict in particular. There is special emphasis on the historical events which made the armed conflict arise, and the actors who participated in it. Chapter four focuses on a more local context and presents a detailed description of the girls' experiences before joining an armed group, during their lives as soldiers and once they joined the DDR program. Initially, there is an analysis of the environment of violence where girls and their families interacted, and the gender relations that characterised such interactions. The main objective was to understand how

these girls grew up, what resources they had available and what limitations they had to face before joining the armed group. Then, the research focuses on the social dynamics inside armed groups, once the girls started operating as soldiers. The following section emphasises on girls' lives at the CAE, how their routines were, what kind of problems they dealt with and how they valued the program they were undergoing.

After describing girls' experiences in detail, in chapter five, I proceed to discuss the importance of looking at children as individuals with the capacity to make choices and not only as victims of the armed conflict. The following section has to do with the situations in which girls had the opportunity to exercise their agency. I highlight the resourcefulness of these girls when trying to find ways to survive and the capacity they portray to plan their future. In the final section I describe girls' needs, concerns and life expectations and put emphasis on the importance of looking at minors not as isolated individuals, but instead as agents who are able to participate in the transformation of their present and their future. In chapter six, I move on to explore the effectiveness of the current institutional response to these girls through the DDR program and what challenges the program still faces.

While in fieldwork I listened to girls' opinions and own interpretations of the experiences they lived. I observed their day-to-day lives and shared quality time with them and their male peers. I tried to get familiar with their environment and understand their way to see life. Besides, I explored the interpretations that girls' psychologists and social workers made about the children's reestablishment of rights process. Then during the writing process, I did my best to effectively communicate what girls' voices expressed.

CHAPTER 2   HUMAN SECURITY AND GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT

"The recruitment and use of children in hostilities is a crime under numerous widely ratified regional and international treaties and is the focus of many Security Council resolutions. As such, in the eye of the law, child soldiers are victims of a crime and are therefore entitled to special attention and protection" (The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, 2012a, p. 11)

According to the Statute of the International Criminal Court, the enlistment of children into armed forces is considered a war crime in both international and non-international armed conflicts (ICRC, n.d., para. 1). It is a crime that violates children's human rights, seriously affects their physical and emotional health, infringes upon their human dignity and puts at risk their individual security. Child recruitment, as a war crime, is a security issue currently analysed by academics, practitioners, and by the international community from the perspective of the Human Security framework that emerged in the early 1990's. What does this framework entail? Why has it become an important guide for national and international institutions to design policies? In order to answer these questions, it is important to understand the context in which this framework emerged and the concept of security that had previously prevailed.

Until the end of the Cold War (1989) the dominant definition of security was based on nation-state sovereignty and territorial integrity (Newman, 2011, p. 1749). Nation-states' main goal was the defence of their territory from political instability, military threats, and economic and financial crises (Jolly & Basu Ray, 2006, p. 3). At an international level, the conflicts to be addressed were mainly inter-state conflicts, such as the First and Second World Wars and the confrontation between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. When the Cold War came to an end, the number of wars among countries considerably decreased. However, the number of conflicts within countries increased and new threats came into view: "ethnic violence, human trafficking, climate change, health pandemics, international terrorism, and sudden economic and financial downturns" (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, 2009, p. 6). These new characteristics of conflicts significantly changed the political and geopolitical

dynamics. Therefore, the international community felt the necessity to start a new security dialogue which shed light on complementary ways to address these new threats. States needed to broaden the concept of security "into new areas more directly linked to human rights and individual concerns" (Jolly & Basu Ray, 2006, p. 4).

By that time, Nobel in economics, Amartya Sen's ideas were being recognised as the foundational concepts of the Human Development approach which emerged in 1990. Sen made reference to development as the enlargement of people's freedoms: economic opportunities, political liberties, and access to social facilities such as health and quality education, transparency guarantees, and protective security (Sen, 1999, p. 53). Sen stated that people's freedoms were the primary end and the principal means of development. The primary end was focused on the expansion of human freedoms as a way to remove people's deprivations. The principal means viewed expansion of human freedoms as a way to reach development and to contribute to economic progress in society (Sen, 1999, p. 37). Based on these ideas, the Human Development approach proposed moving away from the mono-dimensional view of development as economic growth and putting people's freedoms and capacities at the centre. This new people-centric approach was promoted by Mahbub ul Haq and his group of experts in development who published the first Human Development Report from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 1990. Similar to Sen's postulates, this report emphasized the idea of development as freedom, both as human choice and human participation. It presented development as the process of expanding people's choices: access to education and health, protection from violence and crimes, pleasing leisure time, and opportunities to participate in communities (Haq, 2004, p. 17).

Four years later, the 1994 Human Development Report (HDR) presented a new notion of security based on the ideas of the Human Development framework. It moved away from the state-centric focus that protected territories from military aggression, to the protection and empowerment of individuals (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, 2009, p. 6). This HDR promoted the view of Human Security as a framework which was more concerned with human life and dignity than with weapons. It defined Human Security as "freedom from fear and freedom from want and safety from chronic threats such as hunger, disease and repression as well as protection from sudden and

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harmful disruptions in the patterns of daily life – whether in homes, in jobs or in communities." (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, 2009, p. 17). In the same report, the Nobel Peace Prize and former President of Costa Rica, Oscar Arias, expressed commitment to the ideals of Human Security and, focusing on armed conflicts as a human security threat, proposed the creation of a global demilitarisation fund which had as its main goal the support of processes of disarming and demobilising of armed groups (Jolly & Basu Ray, 2006, p. 4).

According to Jolly and Basu Ray (2006), "after 1994, the concept of human security became a central theme of a number of governments through their foreign and defence policies" (p. 4). In fact, Canada, Japan and Norway included Human Security's ideas in their foreign policies. For instance, the Canadian government, led by the minister of foreign affairs, Lloyd Axworthy, stated in 1999 that "human security means safety for people from both violent and non-violent threats. It is a condition or state of being characterised by freedom from pervasive threats to people's rights, their safety, or even their lives" (Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, as cited in Jockel & Sokolsky, 2001, p. 1).

In 2001, the Brahimi Report on UN Peacekeeping Operations highlighted the importance of redefining the peacekeeping strategy that, until that moment, the UN had been implementing. The role played by peacekeepers did not go beyond the containment of confrontations and the stability of states. "The change in the types of conflict necessitated a fundamental re-orientation of strategies necessary to cope with 'new wars'" (Jolly & Basu Ray, 2006, p. 7). The report urged the UN to adopt peacebuilding strategies (p. 7) in which it not only targeted actions to stop war confrontations, but also actions to guarantee a successful postconflict process should be considered (UN, n.d., para.3). From the Human Security perspective, Edward Newman said that "peacebuilding would strive to enhance the physical and material security of individuals and communities, through poverty alleviation, employment creation and public service delivery" (Newman, 2011, p. 1749). Denov (2006) highlights the fact that the Brahimi Report also makes reference to demobilisation and reintegration as relevant mechanisms for postconflict stability (United Nations 2000, as cited in Denov, 2006, p. 330). She

points out that "given its focus on both protection and peacebuilding, DDR represents an important aspect of the human security agenda" (p. 330).

Eleven years after the publication of the 1994 HDR, during the United Nations' 2005 World Summit, in which Human Security was the central discussion, the Heads of State and Government indicated that all people had the right to live free from poverty and inequalities. Moreover, they declared that "all individuals, in particular vulnerable people, [were] entitled to freedom from fear and freedom from want, with an equal opportunity to enjoy all their rights and fully develop their human potential" (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, n.d., para. 4). In this summit, the world leaders agreed to work on three main matters: "the establishment of a Peacebuilding Commission […], a new Council for Human Rights […], and the principle of the responsibility to protect and the right to intervene (Jolly & Basu Ray, 2006, p. 5). The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was a proposal designed by the Government of Canada through the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) in 2001 (p. 7) and was fully adopted by the member states of the United Nations in 2005 (Aning & Atuobi, 2012, p. 217). The ICISS (2001) report states that R2P is based on the responsibility that every state has regarding the protection of its citizens from disasters that can be avoided: genocide, war crime, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. However, when the states "are unwilling or unable to do so, that responsibility must be borne by the broader community of states" (as cited in Aning & Atuobi, 2012, p. 217). According to the report, R2P entails three main responsibilities: "the responsibility to prevent, the responsibility to react, and the responsibility to rebuild" (Jolly & Basu Ray, 2006, p. 7). Jockel and Sokolsky (2001) point out that "human security entails taking preventive measures to reduce vulnerability and minimise risk and taking remedial action where prevention fails" (p. 2). Although they do not refer specifically to R2P when explaining Human Security, their statement shows that R2P's interests are also some of Human Security's interests.

It is interesting how the UN state members, when defining Human Security in the 2005 World Summit, highlighted the most vulnerable people as the ones who really deserved social opportunities for them to improve their way of living and develop their human capacities. That is one of the aspects that Fox (2004) points out when talking

about Human Security. Fox says that this framework's mission is to protect the most vulnerable population from physical threats and deprivations (p. 475). According to the Human Security Network (HSN), children and women, among the most vulnerable people in society, represent two of the groups whose rights need to be strengthened (Embassy of Austria, 2007, para. 8). The HSN is an association of thirteen countries represented by their foreign ministers. The association promotes Human Security as a component of national and international policies, with two of its main focuses being the protection of women and children in armed conflicts (Embassy of Austria, 2007, para. 3). Even though, at a practical level, the territorial integrity and the sovereignty of the states are still priorities of national governments, Human Security has drawn special attention to the security of individuals and both national and international institutions have built up a certain extent of commitment. As stated by Jolly and Basu Ray (2006), "through the engagement of the human security perspective, it is possible to draw connections, make linkages and generate thorough policy alternatives" (p. 8).

Regarding the protection of children, Whitman (2012) reflects on the need to consider the use of children by armed groups from the perspective of R2P. She argues that when addressing the child soldier problem, it is also relevant to count on the international community's responsibility to prevent armed conflicts and the use of children as soldiers; to react when children are being the target of armed groups; and to rebuild the society when an armed conflict ends (pp. 153-160). Whitman makes clear that within the category of child soldiers, girls play a key role, since they "comprise more than 40 percent of the world's child soldiers" (p. 154). Other authors such as Fox (2004) and Denov (2006) recognise the potentialities that the Human Security framework has regarding the ways that girl soldiers' issues should be addressed. Fox (2004) highlights the importance of this framework as one that may open the debate of war-affected girls as a security concern where girls' rights and dignity are threatened (as cited in Denov, 2006, p. 329). Denov affirms that it is a "useful framework from which to understand and respond to the unique needs of war-affected girls and women" (p. 321). Fox (2004) notes that based on Human Security policies, programs like Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) would better address the girls' needs that have been frequently overlooked in postconflict situations (p. 476).

Although the Human Security approach has been recognised as an important step forward in terms of the relevance given to people, some scholars and practitioners think that this framework is still insufficient. In this regard, Truong, Wieringa and Chhachhi (2006) state that there is a challenge which still remains: a deeper analysis on the type of individual who is in a situation of insecurity (p. XXIV). Is it a woman or a man, a girl or a boy? The three authors highlight the fragmented way in which gender issues are approached in the Human Security framework (p. VIII).

Although Denov (2006) points out the strengths of this approach, through her work in Sierra Leone, she also demonstrates that the postconflict processes that have been based on the principles of Human Security have not been effective regarding the protection and empowerment of the girls affected by war (p. 337). Denov argues that one of the main reasons behind such a failure is gender exclusion: "from a human security perspective, while DDR may have focused on the important goals of increasing individual security, protection and human dignity, it would appear that 'individuals' were regarded as either male or gender neutral" (p.337).

Many researchers, including Denov, emphasise the importance of integrating a gender analysis into the Human security framework. Cynthia Cockburn (2001) notes that the use of "a gendered lens makes a difference to what you see of war and peace" (p. 28). She explains that gender consciousness makes people sensitive to the difference between men and women: how they are positioned in society, what kind of experiences they have, and how different their needs, strengths and skills are. Additionally, Cockburn elaborates that a gender lens helps people identify gender power relations in the social structures, and how some manifestations of power - like oppression and exploitation - affect them (p. 28). In relation to social structures and power relations, Denov (2006) states that most human insecurity issues come from uneven power distribution in society (p. 338). She affirms that "while the human security approach has admirably encouraged the protection and empowerment of the individual, it has not sufficiently addressed structural constraints and structural inequalities, which ultimately shape girls' (in)security" (p.339).

An example of this can be found in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000. This resolution recognises the diverse roles of women in conflict and peacebuilding, and calls on the UN actors to improve the "protection of women and girls

from violence during all stages of conflict, to fully integrate gender perspectives in peace and security work, and to increase the participation of women in all decision-making processes to both prevent and resolve armed conflict" (UN Women & POTI, 2011, p. 58). For the first time in history, a United Nations' resolution recognised women as key actors in peacebuilding processes. However, in the presentation of the UN's Women, Peace and Security report in 2002, the Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, stated that "women still form a minority of those who participate in peace and security negotiations, and receive less attention than men in post-conflict agreements, disarmament and reconstruction" (UNDP 2002, as cited in Jolly & Basu Ray, 2006, p. 6). Along these lines, organisations such as UN Women (2011) are aware that the institutional implementation of the resolution has not been translated into concrete actions (p. 54). They affirm that women's underrepresentation in postconflict reconstruction still remains (p. 43). Misha Henry (2007) attributes this failure to the vague explanation of gender that is included in the resolution, as well as the lack of enlightenment when it comes to the interdependence of men's and women's lives (p. 76).

An additional argument regarding the weaknesses of Human Security is given by Denov (2006) when she analyses this framework from the view of Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration (p. 338). According to this theory "structures shape people's practices, but it is also people's practices that constitute (and reproduce) structures. In this view of things, human agency and structure, far from being opposed, in fact presuppose each other" (Sewell, 1992, p. 4). In this sense, Denov explains that individuals should not be analysed only as individuals in isolation. On the contrary, they should be integrated to the structures they belong to. Structures influence individuals and individuals influence structures (p. 338). Denov states that "a combination of individual and structural factors needs to be integrated into the human security agenda. Such an approach would acknowledge the importance of the individual, as well as the active role of individuals in producing and contributing to their own social circumstances and security" (p. 338).

Considering these gaps in the Human Security framework, it is important to have a second approach that draws attention to the differences among individuals and the social power structures which characterise societies, in order to identify how women's and

men's social relationships are shaped. Gender and Development (GAD) is an approach which elaborates on these tools. According to the Institute of Development Studies from the University of Sussex, this approach "focuses on the socially constructed basis of differences between men and women and emphasizes the need to challenge existing gender roles and relations" (as cited in Reeves & Baden, 2000, p. 33). Instead of seeing women in isolation, GAD looks at them in a wider spectrum where both women and men are considered within the social structures that inevitably influence their human behaviour. In the words of Rowlands, GAD "makes visible the power relations that exist between men and women in most societies, the situation of subordination that most women face" (Rowlands, 1998, p. 16)

As in other settings, the context that involves armed groups has particular social relations and power positions which influence human interactions as well. Therefore, the analysis of armed conflicts through the lens of GAD is important:

"The moment that gender is understood as a way of organising differential access to power, resources and authority, it becomes clear that no aspect of war's impact on women, women's impact on war, or even war itself can be fruitfully understood, or changed, without a gender analysis" (Cohn, 2013, p. 29).

Scholars use GAD to analyse both the social structures that define the gender power relations in a situation of conflict, as well as in a situation of reintegration into society. As Caroline Moser and Fiona Clark (2005) affirm, gender is transversal to all social settings, and is especially accentuated during times of political violence and armed conflict (p.3). In such a process, the understanding of the context is essential:

"If we want to understand the multiple relations of women to wars, we need to always ask the question: what is the context within which war takes place, within which people fight, suffer, survive and recover? Answering that question will require not only attention to the specificity of local histories and prewar gender relations, but also analysis of the global processes –historical, political, economic, and social – within which they are embedded." (Cohn, 2013, p. 27)

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Moser and Clark (2005) state that although the literature on political violence and armed conflict is vast, the analysis from a gender perspective is not (p. 3). Along these lines, they highlight the insufficient recognition of women as active individuals in armed conflicts. To support this view they cite Enloe (1993) who argues that "political violence and armed conflict were seen as male domains, executed by men" (p. 3). Moreover, Kelly (2000) and Yuval-Davis (1997) point out that there is a simplistic division of male and female roles in armed conflict where "men were the perpetrators (in defence of the nation and of their wives and children), while women were victims, particularly of sexual abuse and forced abduction" (as cited in Moser & Clark, 2005, p. 3). Such simplistic division of roles is not separate from a common myth that has been embedded in social structures and shapes women and men's interactions in many societies:

> *"Women are reminded that by biology and by tradition they are the keepers of hearth and home, to nurture and teach children 'our ways'. Men by physique and tradition are there to protect women and children, and the nation, often also represented as 'the motherland"* *(Cockburn, 2001, p. 19).*

Although this myth does not describe the whole reality, it illustrates part of it. The fact that such a myth is internalised by some societies and seen as truth, leads to social behaviours that result in the adoption of traditional gender roles which promote gender discrimination in different social settings. Armed conflicts and postconflict reconstruction do not escape from the influence of the 'women as keepers of home' myth. Women's exclusion is a consequence of the categorisation of women as "nurturers of life" and as individuals who boost violence decline and peace; that portrayal enhances the idea of women only as victims (Dietrich, 2009, p. 160).

When making reference to traditional gender roles in war, the UN Women also affirmed that men have been seen as more active individuals in armed conflicts. On the contrary, women have been the victims of forced displacement and violence, and have had to take on non-traditional duties that have increased their workload in order to guarantee their family's safety (UN Women & POTI, 2011, p. 47). Coulter (2009) highlights the vulnerability of women in conflict, since many of them have been the target of sexual abuse and forced labor. He states that despite their participation in war as

fighters, because they are women, "they [also] become rape victims, looters, mothers, or lovers" (p. 10). Frequently, women are treated only as victims during armed conflicts and postconflict reconstruction, and even though the affirmation is partially true, the role of women as perpetrators cannot be overlooked. Coulter, for instance, recognises the different experiences of women in armed conflict: as victims and as perpetrators as well.

While it is essential to acknowledge the victimisation of women in conflict, peacebuilding actors should not only look at the victim's side of the coin. On the side of women as perpetrators, experiences demonstrate that women can also assume active roles in armed conflicts. As Sheila Meintjes (2001) points out, women become soldiers and assume roles previously reserved for men. In her work, she highlights a testimony of a former combatant in Mozambique who described part of her experience:

"After two months of training I stopped menstruating and so did the other women. We were just like men. We were pleased because we thought it was macho. We wanted to be identified as fighters, as men" (Musengezi, 2000 as cited in Meintjes, 2001, p. 67).

As soldiers, not only women but also girls are trained the same way men are trained. They learn guerrilla tactics and war strategies; they become key actors in war intelligence units, play important roles on communication and transport activities, and are providers of nursing services (Meintjes, 2001, p. 63). Women and girls, like men and boys, engage in conflicts as fighters, spies, messengers, and gatekeepers (UN Women & POTI, 2011, p. 42). Along these lines, Cohn (2013) argues that the woman/victim dichotomy is false. Although she recognises the traumatising experiences women have in war, she also draws attention to the resourcefulness of these women to cope with their war experiences and improve their situations (p. 31). That is why she highlights that it is more important to reflect on the "challenges and opportunities that women confront, and the agency they have and constraints they face in responding to these [challenges]" (p. 32).

Within GAD, there are three relevant concepts to be analysed: power, empowerment and agency. According to Oakley (2001), power is "control, or a real ability to effect change" (as cited in Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007, p. 384) and is considered

the root-concept of empowerment (Rowlands, 1995, p. 101). Kabeer (2000) justifies the relevance of the analysis of power, given that the way power is embedded in society may provoke "inequalities in people´s ability to choose" (p. 326). Rowlands (1997) introduced four types of power manifestations, depending on how it is used within a society and the effects it provokes: 'power over', 'power to', 'power with', and 'power from within' (p. 13). 'Power over' is an instrument of domination over 'the other' (Rowlands, 1995, p. 102). 'Power to' is a form of power that creates new possibilities; it does not involve domination. 'Power with' entails group actions. Finally, 'power from within' is the power which enhances self-acceptance and self-respect, which consequently promotes the respect and acceptance of others (Rowlands, 1997, p. 13).

Before describing the way Rowlands conceived empowerment through the lens of these four types of power manifestations, it is important to look at some definitions of empowerment. According to Batliwala (2007), the use of the concept of empowerment became a buzzword in the mainstream, losing its original meaning: "the transformative power of the real thing" (p. 557). Through a study case in India, Batliwala demonstrated that development agencies began to adopt empowerment approaches that did not "result in sustained changes in women's position or condition within their families, communities, or society at large" (p. 562). It is of great importance to remember that the crucial elements in the process of empowerment are the redistribution of power, the transformation of social relations, and the change at both individual and collective levels.

Batliwala (1993) defines empowerment as "the exercise of informed choice within an expanding framework of information, knowledge and analysis (p. 7); a process which must enable women to discover new possibilities, new options […] (p. 11)" (as cited in Rowlands, 1997, p. 23). Kabeer (1999) also connects empowerment to choices. She states that "women's empowerment is about the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability" (p. 435). Along these lines, Moser (1993) argues that empowerment is the ability to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change, through the ability to gain control over crucial material and non-material resources" (as cited in Parpart, Rai & Staudt, 2002, p. 8). Rowlands (1997), Batliwala (1993), and Young (1988) emphasise on the collective aspect of empowerment, since structural social changes would not be possible through

the mere intervention of individual initiatives. Batliwala (1993), for instance, highlights that the change in individuals' mindset is not sufficient, that the outside world should recognise, adapt, and respond to such a change (as cited in Rowlands, 1997, p. 23).

According to Rowlands (1995) the process of empowerment could fit in the different manifestations of power previously described, according to how people interpret the process. The common definition of empowerment has to do with 'power over'; from this interpretation, people who are outside the decision-making process, can be brought into it through empowerment (p. 102). From the interpretation of 'power to' Rowlands (1997) understands empowerment as a process through which men and women realise what their interests are and how those interests are interconnected to the interests of others. The aim of this recognition of interests is to participate in the decision-making from a better position and influence the decisions that can be made (p. 14).

From a feminist perspective, empowerment combines three manifestations of power. 'Power over', which helps to comprehend the dynamics of oppression in society. And 'power to' and 'power within it', through which people must be capable of perceiving themselves "as able and entitled to make decisions" (Rowlands, 1997, p. 14). From this feminist perspective, the ability to define one's goals and act upon them is central to the understanding of women's empowerment (Kabeer, 1999, 438), but it is also recognised that this capacity is exercised within gendered structures of constraints. These constraints are the limits imposed by society's gendered rules and distribution of resources and responsibilities that position different groups of women and men within the various hierarchies of their societies. The challenge is to undo such social constructions.

At a more practical level, Rowlands (1997), explains the way people may experience empowerment through three dimensions: the personal dimension, where the person develops her confidence and is able to remove the effects of oppression. The relational dimension, where the person is capable of reshaping the relationship with the other, as well as negotiating the decisions made within it. And finally, the collective dimension, through which people work together as a group, and make decisions that have a wider social impact (p. 15). People's ability to become conscious of their needs and wants, and their capacity to influence decisions can lead them to undo negative social constructions and transform social relations (p. 14).

With the aim of undoing inequalities and patterns of domination, in the process of empowerment, agency plays a part. In fact, Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) look at empowerment as an expansion of agency (p. 383). Sen (1985) defines agency as "what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important" (as cited in Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007, p. 384). Malhotra's (2002) definition is more precise. He introduces two important elements that are also present in the process of empowerment: choices and resources. This author states that agency is "the ability to formulate strategic choices, and to control resources and decisions that affect important life outcomes" (p.8). According to Kabeer (1999), "choice necessarily implies the possibility of alternatives" (p. 437). Moreover, in the process of exercising agency, making choices implies the disposal of resources as a pre-condition, and achievements as the consequent outcomes. Resources can be material and human and are obtained through the conduction of diverse social relationships in the different social settings; the access to resources within society depends on how power is distributed. "Such resources may take the form of actual allocations as well as of future claims and expectations" (p. 437).

According to Kabeer (1999), agency "can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance, as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis" (p. 438). William Sewell Jr. (1992) argues that a person who exercises his/her agency is a person who has some control over his/her social relations, as well as the capacity to transform them. According to him, the capacity for agency, like the capacity to use language, is, to a certain extent, inherent to all human beings (p. 20).

Although empowerment and agency seem to be similar in some aspects, they are not the same concepts. Alkire (2005) differentiate empowerment and agency by stating that increases in empowerment result in increases in agency, but increases in agency does not necessarily imply increases in empowerment (as cited in Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007, p. 380). The outcomes of agency may remain at an individual enjoyment level, while the outcomes of a true process of empowerment requires transformations at a collective level.

In contexts of war, it is relevant to make reference to the concept of agency provided by Long (1992) and also used by Moser and Clark (2005) in their book "*Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*." Long

defined agency as the individuals' capacity "to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion. Within the limits of information, uncertainty and other constraints that exist, social actors are knowledgeable and capable" (p. 5). This capacity is not only perceived in male and female adults, boys and girls display a great ability to exercise agency as well. A good example is the research on girl soldiers in Sierra Leone conducted by Denov and Gervais (2007). They gather important elements from Long's definition of agency and Kabeer's viewpoint regarding the forms that agency can take - bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance, reflection and analysis. They highlight that very few studies recognise the capacity of girls to exercise their agency. In their study, they explored the ways in which girl soldiers tried to resist abuses within a context of war (p. 887). They point out that in these contexts, girls' "ingenuity and creativity became strategic to individual survival and security" (p. 895). According to them, the strategies that these girls found to protect themselves "highlight the girls' capacity for negotiation and agency as well as resourcefulness, resistance, and mutual support" (p. 895). Finally they note that even though girls have alternatives to choose from when exercising agency, in an armed conflict agency normally takes a defensive form (p. 901).

Along these lines, it is relevant to make reference to both Drumbl's and Castro's ideas. Drumbl (2012) states that "oppression, after all, does not axiomatically void the oppressed's capacity for decision-making" (p. 17). Castro (2003) recognises that children and adolescents, as parts of a social structure, have at their disposal alternatives to choose from; she states that only their particular personal characteristics, allow them to position themselves before those offerings and make decisions (p. 1).

It is important to take into account that in the specific circumstance of making the decision of joining an armed group, the capacity of agency of these girls is easily refuted. The main reason to justify this affirmation is that besides the conditions of deprivation girls usually face and the lack of alternatives, their decision is not a real informed choice, since they are not at all aware of the full range of the implications and actions they have to undertake once in the armed group. Nevertheless, once they begin to perform as soldiers, these individuals learn to protect themselves and act upon their interests.

According to Castro (2002), a common characteristic of children in conflict is that many of them are individuals who, despite their young age, have to leave childhood behind prematurely and take on adult roles (p. 77). Therefore, the abilities they develop allow them to face the extreme experiences they have to live as soldiers. In this sense, Castro, although recognises the importance of protecting children, argues that their exclusive treatment as victims result in the denial of their condition as subjects (p. 78); consequently, their ability to exercise agency is constrained.

Undoubtedly agency is an essential aspect of the present research. Taking as a point of departure the Human Security approach, the aim of my study was to identify the main sources of insecurity which prevented girls from enjoying their freedoms and completely developing their human capacities in the communities to which they belong or belonged. Moreover, what resources and limitations they will face when they complete their reintegration process. From the GAD approach it was important to analyse the political, social and economic conditions that structured the context in which girl soldiers lived. This analysis facilitated the understanding of the girls' behaviours in relation to other girls, and in relation to boys, women and men as well. The primary interest was the analysis of girl's ability "to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion" (Long, 1992 as cited in Moser & Clark, 2005, p.5), and how their experiences shaped such an ability. Then, the study explored if there were cases in which the process of empowerment went beyond the personal dimension and challenged the collective dimension proposed by Rowlands. These results will be presented in following chapters.

Before going to the description of the experiences lived by girl soldiers in Colombia and the analysis of their agency and process of empowerment, the next chapter will present an overview of child soldiers and women in conflict. Most importantly, a description of the Colombian conflict and the situation of child soldiers in this country, following the suggestions of authors such as Cohn who highlights the importance of a context analysis.

CHAPTER 3   OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN AND WOMEN IN CONFLICT

"In the struggle for power everyone is looking for some advantages. And in this context, that advantage is often child soldiers. Easy to find, easy to get, easy to control" (Lieutenant-General Roméo Dallaire in Raymont & Reed, 2012)

The Machel report in 1996 was the first publication to give an in-depth analysis of the impact of armed conflict on children. Although her report to UNICEF estimated that two million children had been killed in armed conflicts, it also highlighted that such approximations were still conservative and hid "the numbers of children whose murders are concealed and remain unrecorded, who are erased from the memory of humankind when whole families and communities are wiped out" (UNICEF, n.d. para. 2). UNICEF estimated, several years ago, that approximately 300,000 children were involved in armed groups in over 30 conflicts around the world. This figure has been used for more than a decade by international agencies and academics when describing the situation of child soldiers. More recently, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (2009) stated that 250,000 children were associated with armed groups (as cited in Whitman, 2012, p. 154). Although the number may give a very general idea of the severity of this problem, this out of date information might also hide what is happening in reality. Unfortunately, the quantification of children directly involved in armed conflicts is not easy to determine, taking into account that the access to war zones is limited and the feasibility to get inside an armed group with the purpose of assessing the number of enlisted children is practically non-existent.

According to UNICEF (2009) "while it is possible to determine where children are associated with armed forces or armed groups, it is much more difficult to determine how many children have been involved" (p. 22). In 2007, the review of the Machel report that was presented to the United Nations General Assembly stated that in order to avoid giving inaccurate results, it was more convenient to describe the specific characteristics that affected children in war (p. 20). Figures and statistics are undoubtedly useful to describe the magnitude of this issue, but exact numbers are not always necessary. The Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed

Conflict (n.d.), for instance, monitors the countries where children are affected by armed conflicts, through the monitoring and reporting mechanism implemented in 2005, under the United Nations Security Council's resolution 1612 (para. 1). According to its 2013 report, children are victims of armed conflicts in 22 countries; the recruitment or use of children by armed forces or groups were among the main violations of Human Rights (para. 1). Although numbers are not clearly stated, the fact that 22 countries report the existence of this problem illustrates the significance of this social issue.

3.1 AFRICA AND CENTRAL AMERICA: TWO REGIONS SIGNIFICANTLY AFFECTED BY ARMED CONFLICTS AND CHILD SOLDIER RECRUITMENT

As indicated in the previous chapter, despite the fact that armed conflicts between different states have declined since the end of the Cold War, armed conflicts within states are increasing. Moreover, their dynamics are different, in part because non-state actors are participating as well. Both, the Machel study (1996) and the UNICEF's review of Machel study (2009) also identified this issue as an important element which considerably impacted the involvement of children in armed conflicts (p. 10). The review emphasized that the motivations of armed groups to use violence should also be studied in order to recognise the activities these groups get involved in, and consequently the tasks children must take on. Although political reasons and social unrest are critical when groups form themselves, economic interests play a part as well (p. 11). A good example is the case of the conflict in Sierra Leone over the control of diamond mines (Denov, 2007, p, 888). This economic activity allowed the rebels to be financially self-sufficient. Unfortunately, in order to operate efficiently, children were forced to participate in tasks that put them at risk. The situation identified by The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative (2012b) in Sierra Leone clearly illustrates the situation: "girls affiliated with armed groups [might] be forced to conceal weapons and diamonds by inserting them into their bodily orifices or headscarves" (p. 5).

The economic interest behind the fight for the control over natural resources in African countries plays an essential role in the perpetuation of armed conflicts – as it also happens in countries like Colombia. As Dena Montague (2002) stated, when making reference to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), "international competition for

scarce resources in general, and for coltan in particular, is a key factor in the lack of state stability and the continuation of war in the DRC" (p. 104). Michael Nest (2009) explains that "while ethnicity is a factor in conflict, however, it is not simply because of ancient tribal rivalries. Rather, it is because ethnicity is directly linked to economic interests related to land and minerals" (p. 65). He argues that the activities of production, manufacture, and consumption have become specialised and globalised (p. 33), and multinational corporations play a crucial role in this process in which they are aggressively participating (p. 63). As in the DRC and Sierra Leone, Mozambique, Angola and Uganda are other African countries where children became immersed in bloody conflicts caused by ethnic violence, economic interests, political instability and social unrest.

All kinds of Human Rights violations were committed in the course of these African conflicts: "physical, sexual, and psychological torture, disfigurement and mutilation, and significant portions of the populations have become either refugees or internally displaced persons" (Denov, 2008, p. 815). Regarding the particular experiences of girls in these African countries, three studies are of great interest: Stavrou's (2004) study in Angola; Denov and Maclure's (2005) study in Sierra Leone; and McKay and Mazurana's (2004) study in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique. The findings of these three studies were condensed in the work of Denov in 2008. In this analysis Denov highlighted the importance of girls for the functioning and survival of any fighting force. Moreover, she outlined the roles girls played in the armed groups and the experiences they lived since they joined the armed group either "voluntarily" or by coercion (p. 815).

On the one hand, some of the girls who expressed having willingly joined these groups said that their husbands asked them to do it; others did it with the aim of being protected from violence, undesirable marriages, or domestic violence including rape. In general, the reasons why girls decide to join an armed group are diverse. Sometimes it is because of ideological reasons (Mazurana, 2013, p. 149) as was the case of some girls in Mozambique who joined the group as a means of emancipation (Denov, 2008, p. 816). Other reasons may include general violence and sexual violence that existed under their

own government and/or economic factors such as access to food and shelter (Mazurana, 2013, p. 150).

On the other hand, girls may be forced to participate in these groups. Dyan Mazurana (2013), as Denov (2008) did, found that the most important motive to involve women and children is the functioning of the groups, taking into account that they do not always have popular support so they abduct women and children to keep their groups operating (p. 150). The abducted girls who participated in the studies previously cited were victims of "surprise attacks, terror, [and] attempts at escape" (Denov, 2008, p. 817). They were obliged to abandon their families and communities (p. 817). Coulter's (2009) work in Sierra Leone also shows the reality of girls as victims of abductions, rape and bush marriage (p. 95). He states that during fieldwork, the narrative of the participants usually "start with the initial attack and abduction, rape and departure of their homes carrying loads of looted goods for the rebels" (p. 96)

The experience of a former girl soldier from Northern Uganda, who was abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), describes what communities can face when rebels take their children away:

> *"One evening in 1996, while Akallo was attending the Aboke high school for girls, LRA rebels came to her dormitory and abducted 139 students. Upon being alerted, the headmistress chased after the rebels and offered her own life in exchange for the girls. She successfully negotiated the immediate release of 109 students but 30 were retained. Unfortunately, Akallo was part of this latter group." (The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, 2012b, p. 11).*

In Northern Uganda the abduction and use of children in war was a very common activity among LRA members. McKay and Mazurana (2004) mentioned in their book *"Where are the Girls?"* that between 70% and 80% of the LRA were child soldiers; moreover, that girls represented 30% of the forces (p. 29). For all of these girls, being a member of any armed group, either "voluntarily" or abducted, meant a one-way ticket to life as part of the conflict. "Once a woman or girl joins one, it is extremely unlikely she will be allowed to leave while the conflict is ongoing" (Mazurana, 2013, p. 148). Most of them did not even consider the option of escaping, since boys and girls were scared by

the warnings of being killed if they tried to run away (Denov, 2008, p. 823). As new members of the fighting forces, girls began a training regime led by the rebels. The majority of the girls in the studies cited above stated that they had participated in physical and technical trainings where they learnt how to use weapons, strategic procedures for military operations, and even singing and dancing activities to entertain their comrades. In Sierra Leone, rebels gave girls alcohol and drugs for them to be able to train and fight at the required level (Denov, 2008, p. 817).

With regard to the duties that girls had to take on, Denov (2008) listed domestic work such as looking after children, cooking, doing dishes and laundry, and fetching firewood and water. She also mentioned military activities such as intelligence gathering, recruitment, trainings, and combat. Finally, sexual slavery and forced marriage. Sexual violence put the girls at risk of getting sexually transmitted diseases and also caused a high level of pregnancies among these underage girls. In Angola, for example, girls were forced to perform sexual acts as a way of rewarding soldiers when their attacks to the opposing party were successful (p. 820). The same situation occurred with some of the girls in Northern Uganda, as reported by Akallo, the former girl soldier who was abducted: "child wives may also be given to commanders as a 'reward' for good performance" (The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, 2012b, p. 12).

Girl soldiers' experiences in these countries have been traumatic. Moreover, the effects on their lives, when they have the opportunity to escape, are also distressing if they do not have the support required to overcome their traumas. When armed conflicts come to an official end, the challenges that societies face in a postconflict process are equal or even more complex to those during the conflict itself. One of the most crucial issues is the DDR process of all former combatants, which aim is to promote security, public safety and peace (Denov, 2008, p. 824). Through a DDR program, a state lead a process in which former soldiers lay down arms, are separated from the military life, and receive support for them to socially and economically reintegrate into society (UNDDR 2006a, p. 6 as cited in Mazurana & Eckerbom Cole, 2013, p. 197). Unfortunately, men have been the main recipients of the benefits of these programs, while women and girls have remained excluded.

There are many examples that illustrate the exclusion of women and girls in DDR programs. In Angola, Stavrou's study indicated that the DDR program was designed to meet the needs of male combatants, while girls were considered too young to be part of the program as ex-combatants. Besides, their activities in the armed groups were seen as domestic work that did not deserve to be included in the plan of demobilisation benefits (Denov, 2008, p. 824). In the end, there were around 30,000 demobilised people in Angola's process, but only 0.2% corresponded to female ex-combatants. In the DRC the situation was similar. Approximately 18,345 ex-combatants demobilised, but only 304 individuals were females, according to the official records that authorities tracked (MDRP & UNIFEM 2005, as cited in Mazurana & Eckerbom Cole, 2013, p. 203). Girls in Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda faced the same circumstances as well (Denov, 2008, p. 823). As Denov (2008) stated, since girls' roles as soldiers were not recognised, the process of reintegration into society for them was spontaneous, without any professional support that could help them in such a difficult process (p. 825).

Apart from Africa, Latin America is another region that has been affected by armed conflicts and the widespread use of child soldiers. Colombia - whose case is described in the next section - El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala are the main examples. In the case of El Salvador, the social discontent because of political, social and economic exclusion became a military confrontation in 1981. The Instituto Interamericano del Niño - The Inter American Children's Institute - (2002), a specialised agency from the Organisation of American States, estimated that around 80,000 people disappeared or died during this conflict. The figures also stated that 15% were minors who were taken to guerrilla schools where they learnt the military techniques required for combat (p. 19). Regarding the Nicaraguan conflict, this Institute highlighted that 60% of the people who demobilised were underage (p. 21). Finally, in Guatemala, the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) together with the national army made the recruitment of children a common strategy during the armed conflict, primarily targeting indigenous children from the Mayan culture. It is estimated that the national army recruited 20,000 children throughout the conflict (p. 18).

Similar to the African cases, the societies in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala suffered the cruel effects of war and are still facing long-term consequences.

Unfortunately there is a lack of reliable information which can illustrate the real situation of child soldiers when the armed conflicts in Central America were in progress and once they finished. In the case of El Salvador, for instance, Maria Santacruz and Rubi Arana (2002) stated that "in the context of post-war […] the subject of child soldiers has not received the attention it deserves as it is demonstrated by the paucity of research and available information on the subject" (p. 384). However, these authors cited an important report published by the Fundación 16 de Enero[1], which gave a general idea of what the situation in El Salvador was. The report stated that among the 8,000 guerrilla ex-combatants, around 2,000 were children at the moment of their demobilisation. Unfortunately, there was no data on the number of children who made up part of the national army (Santacruz & Arana, 2002, p. 385). Nonetheless the quantity of underage soldiers should not be underestimated. Testimonials that confirm that the national army in El Salvador used forced recruitment to enlarge their troops (Cohn & Goodwin-Gill, 1997, p. 47).

Santacruz and Arana (2002) conducted research in which they interviewed 300 former combatants who had joined either the guerrilla group or the Salvadorian forces. Among them, 17.2% were under 10 years old when they joined the group; 72.5% were between 10 and 14 years old; and 10.3% were over 14 years old (p. 388). When describing the types of recruitment, these authors made reference to the occurrence of both voluntary and forced recruitment. In the first case, the motivations for children to voluntarily join the armed groups in El Salvador, were similar to the reasons mentioned in the African cases: survival, revenge, and commitment to the cause of the fight. They also affirmed that forced recruitment, and consequently, the denial of children's fundamental rights, was common (p. 385). As soldiers, men took on military tasks in combat more often, although women also participated. The most common activities for women were cooking, logistics and sanitation (p. 388).

Regarding the process of reintegration into society, Santacruz and Arana (2002) pointed out that children and youth were not taken into account in the peace accords; that even the armed group's leaders ignored them once the fight ended (p.384). Consequently,

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[1] Fundación 16 de Enero was a foundation in charge of the analysis of the social and economic situations of Salvadorians after the conflict and the subsequent projects to develop in order to improve their living conditions.

they had to deal with health problems and economic and social difficulties, which, by the time the research was conducted in 2002, they still had not overcome (p. 384). Most of the youth interviewed said they did not get economic support during their reintegration process; those who were formally demobilised received basic supplies such as clothing, furniture, medicine and food. Almost three in ten had some kind of disability; among them, only 5% received therapy and 7% received psychological counselling (p. 390). They also possessed low levels of education, as a result of low or no income. With respect to psychological issues, the interviewees expressed that the memories from the past, depression, nervousness and anger were the most common emotional changes they experienced (p. 392).

3.2 FEMALE-SOLDIERS' PARTICIPATION: MAKING THE SPECIAL CASE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Women's participation in the guerrilla groups in Central America presents some particularities that made this process different from the ones in Africa. In the opinion of Mazurana and Eckerbom Cole (2013), in Latin America, the great majority of soldiers were not abducted. Because of the conditions under which they were living, they had the initiative to join the armed groups - 30% of individuals in these groups were females. Furthermore, women had more visibility and voice, since their "rights and grievances were also given priority [...] in a number of the leftist movements" (p. 204). Such visibility in the guerrilla groups was also highlighted by Barbieri (1991) when he mentioned that the guerrilla groups had a great number of female combatants. However, he noted that their political discourse was a male discourse on class identity. As he explained, the cause of the homogeneity of discourses had to do with the logic of war and authoritarianism which permeated women's mentality. In order to be successful, women, in the revolutionary organisations, had to assume male values and behaviors, so that gender differences were minimised (Barbieri, 1991: 20, as cited in Casaús, n.d., p. 80).

Along these lines, Cohn (2013) makes reference to the challenges women face when "they try to simultaneously 'do soldier' and 'do gender.' Any form of femininity a woman enacts threatens to mark her as 'not a real soldier'; however if she fails to 'do femininity', she is 'not a real woman'" (p. 19). Inside these armed groups women

assumed roles they were not accustomed to. Firstly, because at the age they joined the groups, they did not yet have the experience and maturity to assimilate to the common social roles that, depending on the specific context, women usually take on. Secondly, because they grew up in a patriarchal society where it was very common that their fathers worked and made decisions, while mothers looked after them and did the domestic chores (Ibañez, 2001, p. 119). Once they joined the armed groups, they were absorbed by the male dynamic that was prominent in that environment. Then, when they went back to their families, their lives considerably changed.

Few efforts have been made to recover the historical memory of the roles of women [and girls] in the guerrilla groups in Central America (Moreno, 2005, p.89). However, some publications exist which gather essential information about them. The social instability that characterised this region in the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's motivated men and women to join the revolution in search of justice and better political, economic and social opportunities. Many women decided to join the fight for a new state free of poverty, repression and unemployment. They made the group's priorities their own priorities, so the specificities of gender were not taken into account (p. 93).

According to Molyneux (1985), in Nicaragua women represented around 30% of the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional) guerrilla group (p. 227). In her opinion, although the participation of women in the armed groups did not result in the dissolution of their identities, the specifics of their motivations to fight were subordinated by the general interests of the FSLN (p. 229). At the beginning the FSLN supported women based on their claim of women's equality, but the recrudescence of the conflict at the counter-revolution stage, obliged women to make the 'revolution's survival' the main priority in their fight (p. 238).

In El Salvador, the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (FPL), a guerrilla group which made up part of the FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional) military structure, started its operations in 1970 with a group of combatants in which 25% were women who voluntarily joined them. As Ibañez (2001) stated, "they responded to the call to build a better future for their children, and fulfilled their social identity" (p. 118). Moreno (2005) called this period the stage of willingness and consciousness. After 1979 the recruitment of women was motivated by necessity and survival, since the

conflict became crueler (p. 94). Moreno pointed out that most of these women spent their childhood inside the guerrilla group, so that their testimonies were marked by the innocence of girls who lost some of their relatives and suffered from violent acts during the dictatorship (p. 91). Their tasks were mainly related to domestic and logistics activities such as cooking, nursing, and communications. Very few of them reached high hierarchical positions in the military and political structures (p. 97).

According to Moreno, inside the group they were used to having their physical needs met, as they received food, clothing and medicine. When they returned home, they had to find a way to survive (p. 105). "For years they had not known what money was worth, much less how to handle it" (Ibañez, 2001, p. 127). Furthermore, everything they did and the manner in which it was done was influenced by their families. They had to reencounter with women - their grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and aunts - whose lives had consisted only of having children, taking care of the animals on the farm and spending most of their time on the domestic chores (Moreno, 2005, p. 93). With regard to their interactions with male ex-combatants, they realised that the image of the revolutionary leader they met in the group disappeared, as men retook their patriarchal role in society (p. 106). It was challenging for them to face such dramatic changes so suddenly in their lives.

Another challenge women faced and are still facing is their memories of war. Despite the fact that women had more visibility throughout the armed conflicts in Central America, they too lived traumatic experiences which marked their lives permanently. The case of violence against women in Guatemala is a relevant example. According to the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), approximately 200,000 individuals died or disappeared during the armed conflict and around 25% were women (CEH 1999, 1; Oficina de Derechos Humanos 1998, as cited in Garrard–Burnett, 2000, p. 2). Among the abuses they faced, rapes, tortures and killings were the most traumatic for themselves and their families. Many of them had to assume the breadwinner role, since their husbands were also killed or disappeared (Garrard–Burnett, 2000, p. 5). The consequences, even after more than a decade since the end of the war, are diverse. Women reportedly suffered nightmares, sadness and depression. Children at the time, now adults, are living the long-term effects of war as well. Trauma, social upheaval, and fear impact their lives

and make them more vulnerable (PRONICE 1998, as cited in Garrard–Burnett, 2000, p. 5 - 10).

Unfortunately, in all these countries, the culture of violence has been widespread for decades. According to Robert Carmack (1988) a culture of violence is a social construction which influences the behavior of individuals and group of individuals, so that violence becomes normative in society. Violence promotes violence (Carmack 1988 as cited in Garrard–Burnett, 2000, p. 9). Armed conflicts always have long-term consequences, especially if peacebuilding processes are not well-addressed, as has been the cases in many African and Central American countries. While the negligence and lack of planning before implementing the DDR programs were not the only cause of negative results, they did have a great impact on the poor resolution of postconflict situations. If former combatants' needs and expectations are overlooked once they start a reintegration process, and their violent behaviours are not addressed correctly, violence will be perpetuated through time in their communities. Unfortunately, the processes of reintegration not only failed to recognise the real needs of women and girls, but also the needs of men and boys. Since women, men, boys and girls are all affected "in different, but related, ways" by armed conflicts and post-conflict processes (UN Women & POTI, 2011, p. 34), the design of any strategy in post-conflict reconstruction must include all community's particular needs and consider their life expectations. No process of sustainable peace would be successfully reached if vulnerable populations were ignored.

3.3 Overview of the Colombian conflict and child soldiers' participation

"Colombia: Memories of War and Dignity" (2012) by the National Centre of Historical Memory (CNMH by its acronym in Spanish) is probably the most complete report on victims of the Colombian conflict that has been published in recent history. It describes the origin and evolution of the non-state armed groups as the result of the social, political, and economic conditions that have impacted Colombian history, as well as the consequences that victims have been facing and are facing nowadays.

The Colombian armed conflict, which is the longest conflict in Latin America, is complex to understand as the factors that originated it are not exactly the same factors

that keep it alive at the present time. However, based on the deep and careful research conducted by the CNMH, this chapter presents some of the main ideas which illustrate almost sixty years of the violence that has caused 220,000 deaths between 1958 and 2002; 27,023 kidnappings between 1970 and 2010; 25,007 disappeared people; 1,754 victims of sexual violence; 4,744,046 forcibly displaced people - 2,520,512 of whom were children; and 10,189 victims of anti-personal mines - 342 of whom were minors - between 1982 and 2012 (CNMH, 2012, pp. 33, 314).

The confrontation between the two traditional political parties in Colombia, Liberal and Conservative, in the mid XIX century is considered the key social situation that eventually unleashed the internal armed conflict in the country. Ideological differences, social discontent because of unequal distribution of land and political repression resulted in a violent confrontation between Liberals and Conservatives. From 1946 to 1958 people in both urban and rural areas suffered the cruelest acts of this political conflict. This period of time is known as "La Violencia" - The Violence. The assassination of the Liberal leader Jorge Eliecer Gaitán in 1948 was the spark that inflamed the minds of Liberalism's followers and opponents. Individuals from rural areas started forming diverse armed groups. Motivated by the success of the Chinese and the Cuban revolutions, they began to spread along the country and took control of some territories. Meanwhile, the state, following the logic of the Cold War, persecuted and attacked these Communist groups that were calling for social reforms to promote better land redistribution policies.

The most remarkable attack was directed by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) at Marquetalia village in 1964. That was the moment when this armed group, with 300 members, defined itself as a guerrilla group (p. 121). The Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), with Maoist ideals, and the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL), who shared the Cuban Revolution's ideals, were two more guerrilla groups that appeared on the scene. The three of them were also influenced by the success of the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua. The social discontent expressed by people in the countryside was also palpable in the cities, so one more major leftist armed group was formed: Movimiento 19 de Abril (M-19). Although they began as an urban armed group, M-19 eventually became involved in rural operations as well (p. 134).

Given the proliferation of these groups and the lack of state presence in some territories in the country, regional elites started supporting logistically and economically anti-subversive or paramilitary groups that might neutralise the guerrilla's offensive in the 1970's. According to some of the leaders' testimonies, these groups also received the support of the national army through trainings and provision of ammunition (CNMH, 2012, p. 21). The main objective was the elimination of what at that moment was the international enemy: Communists.

Within this environment of conflict, involving various subversive groups, as well as the national army, one more phenomenon arose: drug trafficking. The agricultural policies implemented in the Colombian rural areas during this period resulted in the concentration of land in the hands of few people. Some of them found marijuana crops more productive and profitable than coffee, thus leading to the use of lands to crop marijuana, despite the illegality of such activity. Additionally, there was an impressive proliferation of these crops and of laboratories to transform cocaine paste (CNMH, 2012, p. 132). Drug trafficking turned out to be a very common economic activity which permeated all social settings in Colombia, including the National Congress. The CNMH report affirms that this illegal activity had a cultural impact on society, since it became the easiest way to make money and gain social status (p. 145). In order to protect their business and avoid the guerrilla groups' extortions, drug dealers looked for the support of paramilitary groups as well. This is when the armed conflict and the drug trafficking began to overlap. The violent activities of paramilitary groups - known as Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) - considerably increased. They were financed not only by the Colombian economic elites, but also by drug dealers - who wanted to be protected from guerrillas' threats and had the intention of expanding their business. Furthermore, the paramilitary groups were a strategic asset for the national army in their mission of eliminating guerrilla groups (p. 144).

The 1990's was a decade of big changes in the course of the conflict, as was the case in many other countries affected by armed conflicts linked to the Cold War. The fall of the Berlin Wall served as sort of verification for the government to continue the persecution of leftist armed groups, since Communism still represented the international enemy. The state agreed a peace accord with EPL and M-19 which allowed them to

participate in the National Constituent held in 1990 (p. 153). Drug trafficking was an additional front to fight against. In 1993 the war against Pablo Escobar came to an end when he was found and killed. Pablo Escobar was the most important drug dealer in Colombia at the time, and sunk Colombia into its cruelest period of violence caused by drug trafficking. After his death, the Medellin and Cali drug cartels were dismantled.

Even though the government achieved great successes in its fight against drug trafficking cartels and reached peace accords with two armed groups, more challenges still remained. The FARC, the ELN and the paramilitary groups were still alive; moreover, drug trafficking became an easier way for them to finance their operations. Since the cartels were dismantled, these groups managed to get involved in the business relatively easily (CNMH, 2012, p. 169). They strengthened their troops and their war strategies, and spread the control over more territories. As an example, the FARC, the largest and most important armed group, increased the number of members from 5,800 in 1991 to 28,000 combatants in 2002 (p. 162). Although the violence caused by drug dealers decreased, Colombian society, especially in the rural areas, was still suffering from paramilitary and guerrilla groups attacks. The National Centre of Historical Memory describes that period of time as follows:

> *"Between 1996 and 2005, war reached its maximum level of expression, extension and victimisation. The armed conflict transformed itself in a bloody fight for [the control of] land, territory and local power. It is a period of time in which the relation with civilians transformed. Instead of using persuasion, [the armed groups] used intimidation, aggression, death and exile […]. Forced displacement escalated to such a great extent that Colombia became the second most affected country in the World by forced displacement, after Sudan" (CNMH, 2012, p. 156).*

In 1999 President Andrés Pastrana started peace negotiations with the FARC. As a condition, the government cleared an area in the south of the country, where the FARC had freedom to act without any intervention of the national army. After almost two years of talks, the parties stood up from the table and broke negotiations. During that time, the FARC had the opportunity to strengthen their tactics. In 2002, the new presidential administration implemented a radical military strategy against guerrilla groups. Alvaro

Uribe, the new president, increased military spending for equipment renovation, strengthened military forces, and increased the number of soldiers and police officers (Caballero, 2002, p.18). Through a direct military confrontation, his administration managed to weaken guerrilla groups, more specifically the FARC military structure. Under this administration, these guerrilla groups did not have any political recognition that could have led to peace negotiations. Paramilitary groups, on the contrary, participated in a peace negotiation process that resulted in their partial demobilisation in 2006. Although there was a positive impact on most of the Colombian territories that were economically strategic, the problem was not fully resolved during the two administrations led by President Uribe. The radical security policy against the armed groups undermined the options to negotiate peace with the FARC or the ELN and polarised society even more (p. 180).

With the administration that came to power in 2010 - the same one which is governing at present - the opportunity to begin a new negotiation process with the FARC was revived. At the present moment (2014), both the government and the FARC are discussing a five-point agenda in Cuba, which was the neutral territory chosen by the parties. The government is also analysing the possibility to negotiate with ELN, but the final decision has not been made yet.

Although not to the same extent - given the recovery of control of the territory by the state - drug trafficking still has a great impact on the Colombian economy and the armed conflict. Currently, it is one of the main financing sources of all armed groups. A second source that is gaining importance is mining; the boom of this sector "has become a new war fuel, since it represents the opening of a new rent recollection front for the armed actors'" (CNMH, 2012, p. 188). Similar to the situation in the African countries affected by war, the control of natural resources influences and complicates the Colombian armed conflict's dynamics.

Diverse factors have affected the Colombian armed conflict throughout its almost 60 years of existence. Ownership and use of land, political participation claims, and economic power and political control over territories were some of the motivations for individuals to take up weapons and fight against each other. Others witnessed the cruelty of violence and, immersed in the dynamic of the conflict, became not only victims, but

also actors of violence. Children are not the exception. Although the recruitment of children has been a continuous practice during the course of the conflict, the analysis and follow-up regarding this issue only started in the late 90's. The CNMH (2012) report cites the International Tribunal over Childhood affected by War and Poverty (2012) to highlight that between 8,000 and 14,000 children are involved in the Colombian armed groups. The report also mentions 11,000 recruited children as the estimation of Human Rights Watch in 2004 (p. 85). According to the results of the research conducted by Natalia Springer (2012), around 18,000 children make up part of these groups (p. 67). Through her report, Springer draws the attention of the national and international community. She states that Colombia is facing a humanitarian emergency which is still in progress given that child soldiers' recruitment is considerably increasing because of the changing dynamics of the Colombian conflict (p. 14).

As stated before, both drug trafficking and mining became the main economic activities of the armed groups. Unfortunately, in the middle of the logistics process of these activities, children became a necessity; their involvement meant a source of cheap labor for the rebels (CNMH, 2012, p. 85). An additional reason to explain the increase of children's recruitment is the strengthening of the military forces during President Uribe's administration. Their tactics were more advanced and their operations were more effective; consequently, they managed to infiltrate the highest levels of the guerrilla groups' structures and attack the main leaders. Responding to these attacks, the rebels adopted a different strategy which implicated the increase of child soldiers' recruitment. Since the rebels knew that the national army could not comprise their troops with children - considering the illegality of this action - they put minors into their military security rings, in order to avoid the infiltration of the state (Springer, 2012, p. 35).

With regard to the age of recruitment, Springer states that 69% of the children who are already recruited are below 15 years old. Moreover, the average age at the moment of recruitment is 12.1 years old. Among all recruited children, 57% are male and 43% are female (p. 22). After analysing the official information on the current age of the 10,372 demobilised individuals, and comparing it to the time they spent in the armed group, Springer and her research team concluded that every five out of ten ex-guerrilla members joined the groups while underage. In the case of ex-paramilitary members, the statistic

was four out of ten (CNMH, 2012, p. 85). In accordance with the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF), 5,156 children have been registered in the "Specialised Program for Assistance of Children and Adolescents no longer involved with Armed Groups" between November, 1999 and March, 2013; 72% of them are boys and 28% girls. According to their testimonies, 60% were recruited by the FARC, 20% by the paramilitary groups and 15% by the ELN (CNMH, 2012, p. 129).

Children in the Colombian armed groups are required to take on diverse duties. Among the most common ones are surveillance and military intelligence activities, including the installation of landmines. Additionally, they participate in selective killings, kidnappings and disposal of dead bodies, combats, and blackmailing operations. They also support their comrades in logistics duties such as cooking, hygiene tasks, and administration of petty cash (Springer, 2012, p. 45). The CNMH (2012) report points out that the use of girls in the armed groups' strategies is increasing. They are required to infiltrate the enemy, be messengers, transport small arms, explosives and chemicals for narcotics' processing (p. 45). They also suffer from sexual violence. Within the FARC, for instance, they are obliged to use birth control methods and in the case they get pregnant, they are forced to have an abortion (p. 83). When they are trained, Springer (2012) notes that "boys and girls are subdued to a complex dehumanisation process in which they are prepared to kill with indifference" (p. 9). After their demobilisation, children in general face mental issues such as sleep disorders, consumption of psychoactive substances, anxiety, effusive crying, anger, visions, irrational thoughts, psychotic episodes and suicidal thoughts (p. 48).

As has been the case in other countries, child soldiers were overlooked in the demobilisation processes which have been carried out in Colombia. Looking at an international level, "since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, 185 peace agreements have been signed between warring parties. Of these, only nine contained specific provisions for child combatants" (The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, 2013b, p. 16). It is only after the demobilisation of the paramilitary groups in 2006 that this issue was approached more seriously by the Colombian authorities. According to Springer's (2012) research, the DDR process designed for the collective demobilisation of paramilitary groups in Colombia had failures that increased

the vulnerability of these ex-combatants to rearm themselves. Unfortunately, there was no specific protocol to implement in the case of demobilised child soldiers, despite the information that was already available and which confirmed the existence of children in paramilitary's troops. In fact, some ex-combatants interviewed by Springer's research team stated that during the first stage of the demobilisation process, they decided not to report the children they had because that would harm their legitimacy in the negotiation process (p. 52). In the end, out of the 17,581 combatants who collectively demobilised in 2006, only 63 were reported as children, and 32 more children decided to demobilise themselves individually. Consequently, according to Springer, 42% of the children who were not reported and proceeded to the ICBF may now be involved in the new criminal gangs that have recently been proliferating in Colombia. Estimations indicate that 6% of the demobilised children at this time rearmed themselves, due to the failings of their reintegration process (p. 53). Fortunately, at the present time, the national government has a more articulated DDR program for children led by the ICBF. Although it still has some weaknesses, the legal protocols to receive demobilised children and the programs designed for them to undergo a successful reintegration process have at least shown better results.

The next chapters will give a better idea of what is happening at the moment regarding former child soldiers, specifically former girl soldiers. Despite the harsh social conditions they must face in their homes, within the armed groups and during their reintegration process, these girls demonstrate an incredible capacity to make decisions and willingness to rebuild their lives.

CHAPTER 4   EXPERIENCES OF FORMER GIRL SOLDIERS IN COLOMBIA

As previously indicated, thirteen former girl soldiers between 14 and 18 years old participated in this research. The reintegration process of these girls is being led by Ciudad Don Bosco in Medellin, Colombia's second largest city. As of February 2014, all of the girls live at the reintegration centre and are under the legal protection of the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF). Ciudad Don Bosco is a social and educational non-profit organisation founded in 1915 by the Catholic Salesian Community and dedicated to the protection of vulnerable children and youth. Its work with demobilised children started in 2003 when the ICBF selected it as one of the Specialised Attention Centres (CAE) to coordinate and implement the program for the reestablishment of boys', girls' and adolescents' rights. Even though there are three separate CAE's in Colombia, this research was only conducted in the CAE located in Medellin. The girls who were assigned to this location came from various regions of the country. In order to minimise the risk of being re-recruited or attacked, the ICBF sent them to a CAE that was far from the area where the armed group they belonged to operated.

Among the thirteen participants of this research, eleven girls used to live in rural areas before joining the armed group while only two came from the city. According to their stories, none of the girls were abducted. The age at which they joined the armed group was diverse. Five of them joined the group at the age of 14, two at the age of 15, two at the age of 13, two at the age of 12, one at the age of 11 and one at the age of 9 years old. Twelve of them went to the FARC, and only one went to the ELN. None of the girls belonged to a paramilitary group. The girl who spent the longest time in the armed group stayed for four years and the girl who spent the least amount of time stayed with the group for one year. Regarding their partner relationships, the majority maintained several relationships with their comrades. Only one had a child and is facing the challenge of being a mother while undergoing the reintegration process. Some of them became sexually active before joining the group, others after joining it. Finally, these girls left the military life in one of two ways - six girls escaped from the guerrilla group,

three girls were convinced by their families to appear before the authorities, and four were apprehended by the national army.

Table 1   General Information about Participants.

| Pseudonym | Area of Origin | Did she express having voluntarily joined the armed group? | Age | | Armed group she belonged to | Years of operation in the armed group | How did she leave the armed group? |
			When she joined the armed group	Currently			
Ana	Rural	Yes	13	17	FARC	4	She escaped
Angy	Rural	Yes	14	18	FARC	3	She escaped
Carolina	Rural	Yes	9	14	ELN	4	She escaped
Catalina	Urban	Yes	14	16	FARC	1.5	She escaped
Laura	Rural	Yes	14	15	FARC	1	She was apprehended
Luisa	Rural	Yes	11	14	FARC	3	She was apprehended
Maria	Rural	Yes	15	17	FARC	2	Her family convinced her to leave
Melisa	Rural	Yes	14	18	FARC	2.5	She escaped
Monica	Rural	Yes	12	16	FARC	2.5	Her family convinced her to leave
Sandra	Rural	Yes	13	17	FARC	4	She was apprehended
Sara	Rural	Yes	15	18	FARC	3	She escaped
Susana	Urban	Yes	12	14	FARC	2	Her family convinced her to leave
Vanessa	Rural	Yes	14	15	FARC	1	She was apprehended

Table 1 lists characteristics that give us a very general idea of girls' profiles. The next sections describe the experiences and testimonies shared by these girls, who voluntarily participated in the research. Their interactions with other girls, boys, women, and men, the resources they had at their disposal, and the way power was distributed within their contexts, significantly influenced their behaviours, as it will be illustrated along this chapter. Such a description will help us to have a better understanding of the context in which girls lived.

4.1. EXPERIENCES OF GIRL SOLDIERS IN COLOMBIA BEFORE THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN ARMED GROUPS

The social environment in which these former girl soldiers grew up was the primary influence on their decision to join an armed group. Both poverty and a culture of violence surrounded these girls who saw in the armed groups, an alternative to avoid their immediate reality. When people lack economic opportunities and have insufficient access to health, quality education, political participation, and security - basic factors for them to *enlarge their freedoms* - they are driven to desperation and extremes to survive. Although at the 2014 World Economic Forum in Davos, Colombia was recognised as the third largest economy in Latin America, after Brazil and Mexico (Proexport, 2014, para. 1), its healthy economy and its economic growth rate have not translated into better conditions for the most vulnerable people in the country. According to Lars Moller (2012), the inequality rates in Colombia are comparable to the situation in countries like Haiti, Angola and South Africa. Moller, as a representative of the World Bank, states that Colombia is the seventh most unequal country in the world (para. 1). Additionally, UN Habitat (2013) positions Colombia as the third most unequal country in Latin America after Brazil and The Dominican Republic ("Colombia el tercer país más desigual de Latinoamérica", 2013, para. 1).

Although inequality affects both urban and rural areas in the country, the latter are the most excluded areas. Most of the girls, who mostly came from the countryside, reported having faced economic deprivations in their childhood. What their families earned every month was scarcely what they needed to survive. According to Springer's (2012) research, 69% of child soldiers in Colombia come from rural areas and their families belong to the 12.6% poorest people in the country (p. 21).

Access to school was not a problem since all the girls affirmed that they were attending school before joining the armed group. However, school kept them occupied for only five hours a day; the rest of the day they spent at home, helping their mothers or socialising with people in villages where the subversive environment was a daily reality. Furthermore, schools do not always protect children from being recruited. In some cases, guerrilla groups visit the classrooms and talk to the students. That was how Melissa had her closest approach to a guerrilla member for the first time:

"I saw her in my school. My teacher closed the door not allowing her to get in my classroom. She visited the others. But she reached me at the entrance of the school when we finished class"

Although Melissa stated that was the first time the FARC visited her school, her story coincides with similar events reported by the Human Rights Ombudsman and made public by the Colombian media. According to some newspaper articles, in May, 2012 the FARC had visited a school in Putumayo and recruited child soldiers (Redacción El Tiempo, 2012, para. 1) and did the same in September 2012 in Guainía (Macías, 2012, para. 1).

The sixty-year conflict turned rural areas into the main theater of operations for illegal activities. Unfortunately, inhabitants of these areas became the main actors in this activity as a result. Willingly or not, these people ended up immersed in the rationale of the conflict, which also included the rationale of the drug trafficking business. Violence became the norm in this society as a consequence of what Carmack (1988) called culture of violence: a social construction which influences people's behaviours (as cited in Garrard–Burnett, 2000, p. 9). Colombia is a good example of this culture. As Julián Aguirre (2002) notes, the Colombian conflict is framed on the basis of violence in both the private and the public spheres (p. 124). In the private sphere, domestic violence seems to be a constant in the intimacy of many Colombian families where patriarchy is the rule. According to the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences (2013), in 2012, 47,620 women were assaulted by their partners and 18,100 were sexually abused (para. 4). With regard to child abuse - punishment, humiliation, psychological and physical abuse, and negligence - the ICBF attended to approximately 45 cases every day; three out of every four cases were perpetrated by parents. Between January, 2012 and January, 2013, ICBF attended to 16,457 cases in total - 51.5% were boys and 48.5% were girls - (ICBF, 2013, pp. 1-2). Then, when children try to run away from the abuses at home, they find more violence in the outside world.

In the specific case of the living environments of the girls interviewed in this study, violence was a constant factor. Regarding domestic violence, 53.8% of the girls reported having been psychologically and physically punished by their relatives. Two girls were

beaten up, two girls were psychologically abused, two girls were raped by their father/step-father, and one girl was abandoned by her mother. Ana, one of the girls, explained how her mother used corporal punishment with her and her four siblings when they misbehaved:

> *"My mom used to plunge us into the river, put us on our backs, and then put her foot on our necks while we were lying on the water's surface, so that the water went into our mouths and noses"*

Different to other cases, Ana does not show any resentment towards her mother. She is grateful to her mother for the effort to persevere despite the economic and social limitations they faced. Her mother was a single parent, which meant she had the sole responsibility for financially supporting her kids, feeding them, and educating them. Ana's father had died and her stepfather did not always live with them. *"We were forcibly displaced",* her mother said, *"I left the village with my kids, I struggled during that time, but I did not give them to anybody. When I found my second husband, things changed again. He built a house for us."*

There are other cases where girls showed resentment and a desire to harm or murder of their relatives due to the abuses they or their family members suffered:

> *"When I was younger I was lucky to be hit by my relatives [she makes a sarcastic face]. When I was living with my godmother, she used to spank me. My stepfather's family hit me too. My mom and my dad beat me as well. When I went to live with my grandma, she also hit me [...]. At the end I left home [...]. I wanted to kill my step-father, but I was not capable of doing it because of my siblings"* Monica

> *"[My father] used to hit my mom a lot and I got so angry one day that I told him if he touched her again, I would kill him. I took the gun I had and I put it against his forehead [...]. My little sister begged me not to do it; my little brother instead, told me that it would be better to have him dead so he could earn some money [...]. My body was shaking, I could not do it"* Maria

Maria was also a victim of sexual abuse by her father. Her frustration and wish for revenge was fed by the abuses that she and her mother had to suffer. According to Maria, the police were offering rewards for reporting on guerrilla or paramilitary members. For this reason, her brother knew he could earn money as compensation, since his father was a member of an armed group.

A relevant factor which strongly influences domestic violence in some of these families is male dominance. Most women in these rural areas adopt the traditional gender role of looking after their children while men work and make decisions. Women play a more passive role which in most of the cases is limited to obeying their men. As Mazurana (2013) highlights, "intra-family physical and sexual violence against boys, girls, and women is common in Colombia and is symptomatic of a larger, culturally ingrained sense of male superiority and domination, or 'machismo', that permeates social relations" (p. 155). One of Ana's experiences reflects how girls learn to obey men from a very young age. The first boyfriend Ana had, at the age of 13, asked her to move in with him and his family. Her uncle told her that she should do it, so she accepted. She also remembered a New Year's Eve when her boyfriend forbade her to dance with her brother-in-law, so she remained seated while others danced. Another example comes from Laura's experience. When she was 14 years old, she had to move into her sister's house to take care of her niece and the house, because her sister had pregnancy health problems and her brother-in-law had to work. Although Laura had older brothers at home, she took on the role that her sister could not fulfill. *"I had to do my sister's and brother-in-law's laundry",* she said.

Traditional gender roles dominate and promote gender discrimination. One more example comes from Luisa's experiences who has always felt rejected by her biological mother for being a girl, as she expressed during our talk:

> *"One time my mom raised her hand to hit my face; I stopped her and put her down*
> *on the floor so I could place my foot on her neck. I told her that I knew she was*
> *happy because her first baby boy was coming, but she had never loved my sister*
> *and I because we were girls"*

Since Luisa's mother did not take care of her own daughters, their grandmother decided to raise them. For Luisa, her grandmother is her real mom and dad. Only when men are absent can women assume the roles left by them, as was the case for Luisa's grandmother, Ana's mother and Catalina's mother. The latter told me with a tone of regret: "*I was mom and dad. Due to my job, I had to leave them [her children] alone. That is why they became out of control*".

Although half of the group did not mention domestic violence while recounting their stories, they did express other issues that affected their family lives such as divorce, alcoholism and drug addiction, and the absence of their relatives either because they were killed in their villages or because they had joined an armed group. Springer's (2012) research shows that 58% of child soldiers have a close blood relative in first or second degree, or a close friend in an armed group (p. 21). In this specific study, nine of the thirteen girls had a family member in the armed group.

It is important to highlight that the aim of recounting these stories is not about stigmatising girls' families because of the way girls were treated; on the contrary, it is about trying to understand the context in which former girl soldiers and their families lived. In the environments where people interact there are various context-specific factors that influence any action/reaction of individuals in society. In this case, the overlapping culture of male dominance and violence in a context of poverty and inequality has turned girls, and their relatives, into victims and aggressors at the same time. The tough social conditions they have faced and the dynamics they have been involved in have influenced their roles and interactions in society. Violence has promoted violence.

4.2. EXPERIENCES OF GIRL SOLDIERS IN COLOMBIA DURING THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN ARMED GROUPS

"The reality of girls making a clear and informed choice to join armed groups has been of considerable debate, as in many cases, a lack of alternatives or intrafamiliar abuses may 'force' girls to 'join' armed groups. Furthermore, some girls also report joining an armed group impulsively, having little or no information regarding the implications of their decision" (Denov & Ricard-Guay 2013, p. 477).

Trying to find a new reality, girls idealised the military life and decided to become involved in armed groups. The words of Ruiz (2002) explain this situation: "the daily routine of war makes youth build imageries and ways of interaction that are influenced by symbols of war. That is why being part of an armed group becomes a dream" (p. 29). As previously stated, none of them were abducted, they expressed having joined the armed group "voluntarily". However, in agreement with Denov's statement, it is essential to understand that girls' move was not based on an informed decision, since they were not completely aware of the consequences that they had to face. Moreover, taking into account the conditions of poverty and violence, they had very few alternatives from which to choose.

4.2.1.Girls' experiences with recruitment

For the girls, belonging to an armed group was the option that offered them what they wanted to live at that moment. In addition to the social conditions that played a part in the girls leaving their families and communities, the girls recounted specific motives which drew them to these groups. According to their stories, two girls did not want to live with their relatives anymore because they were tired of their daily lives with them. Three girls joined the FARC desiring to take revenge against the members of their families who mentally or physically abused them. In this regard, Mazurana (2013) indicates that a common recruitment practice of the FARC is to target children who are victims of domestic violence and ask them to join the group (p. 156). One girl had already left home and had a job she liked; when she was offered the option of joining the guerrilla group, she said she reflected on the offer and, in the end, regarded it as simply a change of job. For two girls, joining the guerrilla would mean finding their siblings who had joined the armed group before they did. One more did not like studying and it was what her family wanted her to do; she thought the best she could do was leave home. Two girls 'fell in love' with guerrilla members, so they went after them. Mazurana (2013) also made reference to this fact when she stated that "there may be elements of courtship, as older male guerrilla members develop relationships with young girls, with the ultimate agenda of recruitment" (p. 156). Finally, in the case of the last two girls, joining the guerrilla was a natural consequence as the groups were a fixture in their lives.

"It was quite normal to me because my mom had a brother there [in the guerrilla group]. Some of them used to visit us. I liked them because I grew up with them. Then, when I was twelve I wanted to go there" Monica

"I was not born in the group but they were always in my house. They took care of me as if I were their daughter; they were always concerned for providing me with what I needed" Sandra

In the first case, Monica asked the guerrilla commander for his permission to get into the group. In the second case the commander told Sandra that she should join given that her brother had been killed. *"He told me: it is your turn now"*, she said, *"I replied: well, if I have to do it, I will do it"*. Sandra explained that she was not scared, that for her it was a tacit commitment since all of her older brothers were also guerrilla members. Three of the girls mentioned the recognition they could gain and the respect they could inspire before civilians as an additional motivation for them to be a part of the group. *"It's cool! It's like people respected you"* said Monica. *"Arriving in a village and being treated better than any famous person in the world. That was important to me"* said Luisa. *"You feel important! People used to look at you with respect"* said Susana.

4.2.2. Girls' experiences in the armed groups

Once within the armed group, the first radical change the girls encountered had to do with gender roles. Different to what they had experienced in their families, in the guerrilla men and women had to assume the same roles with the same duties. Men and women had to cook, do the dishes and the laundry, watch over the camp, transport provisions, and fight in combat. Even though all the girls highlighted, during our conversations, how equality prevailed in the guerrilla group, their descriptions reflected a behaviour toward women that blurred their femininity to some extent. The trainings made their bodies visibly muscular. While in the mountains, both women and men would wear wide t-shirts, boots and camouflage pants. Although crying was not forbidden, they were bullied by their comrades when they cried or showed any sign of weakness. Luisa, when explaining what could happen if a girl wanted to help her boyfriend, affirmed: *"if you*

want to do his laundry, do it; if you want to do his dishes, do them; if you want to carry his equipment, carry it. But then, face the consequences."

Adopting a masculinised femininity was not a choice, they had to do it; otherwise, they were punished. Mazurana (2013) describes FARC's policy of gender equality as a special case study. She cites Ortiz (2006) and Herrera and Porch (2008) to explain that this guerrilla armed group did not have such a policy in its political discourse when they formed themselves in the 1960's. Women used to support the group just as cooks and cleaners, not as combatants. However, when this armed group began to face problems for recruiting new members and keeping public support in the 1980's, its leaders decided to include an internal statute that guaranteed gender equality in their troops (p. 155). Although the participants in this research never mentioned ideological reasons for them to have joined the armed group, they considerably valued the equality they found among their male and female comrades.

In general, the responsibilities girls took on were related to the logistical functioning of the armed group: cooking, digging holes for garbage and excrement, watching over the camp, and transport of provisions - food, medicine, clothes, and personal items. Another common role was military intelligence including the gathering of strategic information, and military missions in the villages. Some of the girls learned to install and remove anti-personnel landmines and handle all kinds of explosives. Some of them had to sell cocaine in the nearby villages. Girls also participated in combat against the national army or the paramilitary groups, and in attacks on village infrastructure. All these tasks were also assigned to boys and men. Only one specific duty was reserved to women only. Since women and especially girls are not normally searched when they pass through the military control points of the national army, girls were in charge of transporting drugs, weapons, money and explosives.

While in the mountains, the diseases that most affected them were malaria – caused by the bite of infected mosquitoes - and leishmaniasis - caused by the bite of sandflies. These are known as tropical diseases "that occur solely, or principally, in the tropics" (World Health Organisation, n.d., para. 1). According to the social worker at the CAE, Gloria Villegas, since the recovery process of both diseases is slow, the recurrent

symptoms are some of the most frequently treated health issues during boys' and girls' lives at the CAE (personal communication, March 25, 2014).

Training was extreme and traumatic. It consisted of exhausting days starting at five in the morning, with only ten minutes to get ready and entailed exercises such as jogging, push-ups, or crawling on the ground. They also suffered from inhumane exercises that challenged their dignity and their physical integrity. Balancing on a tree trunk while trying not to fall down into a river; crawling in mud under a low barbed wire or under the bullets shot by their trainers. Or doing the splits as far down as they could, holding that position for two or three hours under the heat of the sun with a stake underneath. A simple mistake resulted in the death of some of their comrades with some of the girls as witnesses. Not all of the girls passed through the same trainings; it depended on their functions as soldiers and the strategic role they played in the group. In Colombia there are two different names to distinguish the guerrilla members of the same armed group, according to their roles. For example, if a FARC member operates in the mountains, that person is a FARC guerrilla member. However, if that FARC member operates in the village, performing military intelligence and supporting the logistics of the group from the civilian side, that person is a FARC militia member. In the militia group they do not need to be trained for combat in the mountains. Some people begin in the militia and then go to the camps as guerrilla members. Being there, they have to do at least the basic training which consist of physical resistance and use of weapons. According to the girls, the training for Special Forces - a specific operation unit in combat - was the toughest one.

As part of their training, they were taught to treat the rifle as their mothers: *"when you receive the rifle they tell you: this is your mom […], this is your life"* said Sara. *"We had to grab the rifle and lay down on the floor without letting it hit the ground; you should let yourself hit instead, because the rifle was like your mom"* said Laura. The value that many of them placed on the rifle was not as an object, the rifle became the receptor of girls' feelings; it became the only company they could trust while in the guerrilla group (Ruiz, 2002, p. 33). It was not easy for any of the girls to shoot the rifle for the first time in combat. They experienced a great deal of distress in that moment. *"I couldn't do it, I froze, I panicked"* said Monica. Luisa, who until that moment had

enjoyed her life in the guerrilla, thought of home: *"when you hear the first shot, you freeze, your body shakes. You see a bomb exploding and that day you start thinking of your family."* Maria and Sara talked about the effect of gunpowder on them: *"I was terrified when I shot the gun for the first time. After the first shot, you feel the gunpowder and you start shooting and shooting."* said Maria. According to Sara, *"you feel the gunpowder and your adrenaline increases and you want to go there [to the enemy's side] and beat them. You feel the first ten bullets passing by and you feel that your mind is burning. You only want to shoot."*

When discussing sanctions, girls' experiences coincided when it came to the types of penalties that were normally imposed. Penalties depended on the seriousness of the offence; Luisa explained this in detail: *"If it is a minor fault the sanction could be to fetch 50 barrels of water, 50 loads of firewood or sand, to dig 10 holes for garbage or five 1x1 meter trenches, or to cook for 20 days."* In some cases sanctions were more severe. One girl affirmed that sometimes people had to dig holes while being chained; another girl had to be enclosed in an electrical fence. Luisa also mentioned 'war trials' as one of the worst sanction: *"major faults such as robbery, drinking alcohol outside of the camp, or sexual abuse to a comrade lead to a 'war trial'."* Luisa stayed for several years in the guerrilla group. She was one of the girls who internalised the rules the most and, in general, the military rationale of the group to which she belonged to. She spoke as if she still were a soldier; the explanation she gave - in first person - about what a 'war trial' was, shows how committed to the group she was:

> *"The person is tied up against a pole. We give him six meals a day; his life is respected at all times [...]. Then we gather the guerrilla group, we put him there. He has the right to speak in front of the group. Among his comrades, he will choose his defender. We will select a prosecutor, the person who says that we should kill him because of the fault he committed. We select five 'jurors of conscience' who take note of everything. We select a president who gives the floor to the prosecutor, etc. [...]. At the end we count the votes in favor of death and in favor of life"*

Two of the girls affirmed that sometimes the victim of the *'war trial'* would dig the hole where he or she would be buried. Only two girls did not witness a 'war trial'

because they were only part of the militia; the others had to be present in more than one.

4.2.3. Girls' experiences with relationships and perceptions on sexual violence

Only in the privacy of the tents, girls' masculine behaviour faded giving way to traditionally feminine roles they had to also fulfill. Although they were still children their lives in the armed group exposed them into a world of adult-like relationships, love and sex. When recounting their experiences with relationships, twelve girls expressed not having felt forced to do something they did not want to do. Men, women, boys and girls were allowed to establish relationships inside the armed group. The conditions were clear: they had to inform their commanders when they were going to start a new relationship. They had to ask for permission if they wanted to have sex. Boys and men had to use condoms and girls and women had to use birth control methods; normally in the armed group males were given condoms and females were given the contraceptive injection. Pregnancies were forbidden in the armed group; eleven girls affirmed that pregnant girls in the FARC were forced to abort, and five girls witnessed forced abortions. Keairns' fieldwork in Colombia confirms this fact: "The girl was held totally responsible for any pregnancy. All pregnancies were to end with an abortion" (Keairns, 2002, p. 12). Seven girls said that getting pregnant was among their main fears while in the armed groups, because of the risk of being forced to abort. For this reason, not getting an injection was not an option. They comprehended why they needed to take it, so more than lack of education or cultural/religious constraints, survival gave them the reason to adopt birth control methods. In fact, religion was never an issue they reported as an essential factor in their lives. They are girls who left home early and stayed away from their schools and their families, which are the environments where Colombian people learn about religious beliefs. Therefore, these girls stayed away from religious influences for several years.

Regarding sexual abuses, all of the girls stated that rape was forbidden. According to them, rape was one of the most serious offences in the guerrilla groups and it could lead to death penalty. Twelve girls expressed anger when they were asked about rapes

because, according to them, people in Colombia, including mass media, assured that women and girls were raped in the guerrilla groups, when the reality was different. Only two of the thirteen girls said that rapes could occur but only when guerrilla members broke the rules.

Girls were used to having short relationships, since movements of people from one camp to another were very common. They knew that their partner could be with them one day but perhaps not the next. Six girls expressed having had several relationships in the armed group, without any problem of being punished or stigmatised by their comrades or commanders. Two girls indicated that a relationship between a commander and a girl or a woman was the only situation in which equality was broken, because of the benefits they could get. Five girls had a relationship with a commander, which meant more lenient sanctions, more food, or permission to visit their relatives. One of them said that commanders' women were allowed to have children; they were not forced to abort.

4.2.4. Girls' experiences when leaving the armed groups

All girls had different motives that led them to abandon the group. Two girls escaped from the armed group because they realised that they were going to be victims of a 'war trial'. Two girls escaped because they grew tired of being in the armed group and were missing their relatives. Two more were demoralised because their partners were not with them anymore – one was moved to another camp and one was captured - so when they found the opportunity, they escaped as well. Three had the chance to visit their relatives. After several days of spending time with them, their relatives convinced them to turn themselves in to the legal authorities. Finally, four girls spoke of being apprehended[2] by the national army.

Upon escape from the group, the girls faced the fear of being caught by a guerrilla member or even by the national army. With the former, they knew that only death was the ending of such a brave deed. In the latter, they were afraid, because according to what they were told in the armed group, the soldiers from the national army would hit them, rape them, and torture them if they captured them. In the rationale of the conflict, these kinds of threats are explained by the need of commanders to maintain cohesion inside the

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[2] The national government refers to captures or apprehensions as 'rescues' since it does not consider children's move to join an armed group as a voluntary decision, but as a coerced action.

armed group and control of the troops. Commanders need to create an enemy and demonise it in order to unify their troops (Castro, 2001, p. 57). Through this type of intimidation, commanders managed to maintain a hatred of the enemy - the national army. When the girls were asked about what happened at the moment they encountered the army after leaving the armed group, three of the girls recounted good experiences. Moreover, one girl was assisted by one of the soldiers to escape from the militia. Six more confirmed they were not afraid of the national army anymore, because they had not experienced traumatic situations when they escaped.

However, four testimonies revealed that the girls' fear of being captured by the national forces was not a simple threat made up by the armed group. These girls affirmed to have witnessed soldiers' mistreatments. Indeed, two of them were victims of physical abuses: one girl was tied up and hit by soldiers and another was hit by a police officer. Unfortunately, these abuses identified while in fieldwork were not the only violation of law against girls' rights by the national public force. According to Article 176 (Ley 1098 de 2006) of the Children and Adolescents Code (2006), children and adolescents who leave a non-state armed group must not be used in intelligence activities or interviewed by the members of the public force. To this regard, the rights of five of the girls were respected from the moment they appeared before the authorities. Nonetheless, eight of the thirteen participants in this research admitted having been interrogated by members of the national army. They were trying to gain information regarding the armed group. Springer and her team (2012) also identified similar cases in the research they conducted. Six cases of physical abuse and 49 cases - out of 491 interviews conducted - of irregular children's detention were acknowledged (p. 57).

These incidents of mistreatment of the respondents for this study should not be regarded as generalised practices among the army; nevertheless, it would be irresponsible to omit these events. It would be counterproductive to overlook negative experiences of these girls since stories such as these show the national authorities that some branches of the large military network still violate Human Rights.

4.3. EXPERIENCES OF GIRL SOLDIERS IN COLOMBIA AFTER THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN ARMED GROUPS

As part of the legal process, when a minor appears before any member of the national army or the police, or is apprehended, the first step is the legal identification of the individual and the confirmation of the person's age. If he or she is underage, the authorities must immediately contact a representative of the ICBF. In the case of the thirteen girls, once they left the police station or the military unit, ICBF sent them to a temporary home for two or three weeks. They received medical attention, housing, and food, while a voluntary family - monitored by ICBF - took care of them. In the meantime ICBF selected a more convenient city for them to live in. Afterwards, they were sent to a "transitory institution" in the selected city, where they stayed for a time of between two and four months. This was the stage in which the girls' psycho-affective state and their family situation were diagnosed. Their health and skills were analysed as well (Procuraduría General de la Nación – UNICEF 2006, as cited in ODDR, 2009, p. 30).

Meanwhile, ICBF was processing their entry to the Specialised Attention Centre (CAE), which in this specific case was the CAE Ciudad Don Bosco in Medellín. The CAE is the centre where the girls are currently living (April 2014) and will remain, if they so choose, until they turn 18 years of age. At the CAE, girls begin their process of socialisation with other male and female adolescents who have passed through similar experiences. Additionally, they socialise with the classmates at the school and the vocational trainings they attend. Not all the students are former child soldiers, at the school they socialise with all kind of youth; at the workshops they share time with youth who have also lived in challenging contexts - different to war contexts. They are allowed frequent contact with their relatives by telephone. Depending on the circumstances - especially with regard to safety issues - some girls have the opportunity to visit their relatives often. Others are able to travel only in December for Christmas and New Year's Eve. Those who run high safety risk where their families live are not able to visit their homes, but instead have the chance to see them during the "Family Reunion Event" organised by Ciudad Don Bosco every year.

The girls' time at the CAE is a time in their process of re-socialisation that can be full of contradictions. First of all, the CAE represents the ending point to their military

lives, or at least an intended end to their involvement. All concrete memories including photos and videos with their comrades, and their uniforms - camouflage pants and boots - are left behind. They realise that their rifle, a symbol of power and safety, is no longer with them so they must assume this strength on their own. Although they often feel lonely and unprotected, they recognise that their constant fear of death is diminishing; instead of getting up in the morning to attend training or combat, they get ready to go to school. They gradually begin to comprehend that the solution to their problems is not guns but words. Autonomy is one of the pillars on which the CAE Ciudad Don Bosco bases its pedagogy. Psychologists and social workers focus their interventions on the development of the youths' capacity to make decisions.

Throughout this entire process of entering and leaving the armed groups, the girls are in a constant redefinition of roles. When they leave the armed group, they realise that equality is not a priority in the social groups in which they interact. At the CAE they are not treated the same way they were treated in the armed group; and they are not treated as they were treated before joining the group either. Respect for physical, biological, cultural and emotional differences among the boys and girls at the CAE are encouraged. They left behind their lives of economic deprivations, domestic violence and military behaviours. In this sense, they need to explore their new position in the new environment in which they now live. Girls are free to express their feelings and concerns just as boys are. However, it is relevant to point out that the CAE is not immune to the traditional social structure in which patriarchal ideas and behaviours are still present. In their interaction with others - professionals, classmates, relatives, volunteers, and friends - girls will have to face circumstances in which patriarchal behaviours may affect them. As an example, girls are required to be accountable for the correct sexual behaviour when they are with boys and men, therefore, freeing male individuals from any responsibility. This reflects the macho culture in which the Colombian society is still immersed. Only they, by becoming conscious of their needs and wants, will be able to undo what Rowlands (1997) calls 'negative social constructions' in the context they live.

Denov and Ricard-Guay (2013) highlight the challenge that girls face when "rediscovering her sense of her own femininity following demobilisation" (p. 483). They cited one of the girls interviewed during their fieldwork:

"When one goes [into an armed group], one does 'men things' [...]. You lose the feeling of being a woman ... Before, I did not value myself, I felt like I was not a woman but a man ... I would dress like a man, I would act as a man, everything I would do, I would do it as a man ... You have no space to be a woman ... That has changed ... the difference is huge because now I can wear a skirt, I can fix my hair, I can dye it, I can wear makeup [...]. I can be more like myself without them telling me what I have to wear [...] I began very slowly ... the adaptation was very difficult. (Interview, Colombia, 20 February 2011)" (p.483)

Through observations, I noticed that personal relationships were probably the factor which most affected girls' communal living. Most of them use their new freedoms to wear make-up, high-heels, blouses, strapless shirts and skirts to attract boys' attention. In some cases, relationships and attention can become a competition between girls not only at the CAE, but also at school and at the vocational trainings. Since the youth do not have to ask for permission to begin a new relationship, as they had to while part of the armed group, they find it easier to jump from one relationship to another one. On several occasions, CAE's professionals have had to intervene to resolve the conflicts that arise. It is challenging for the psychologists and social workers to monitor and guide boys' and girls' sexual behaviour, given that, compared to other girls of the same age, their sexual behaviour is generally much more advanced. This is understandable, taking into account that apart from their hormonal changes, most of the girls at the age of thirteen, had already lived with a husband, before or during their time in the armed group. It is relevant to highlight that given that the use of preservatives in sexual relationships is required in these armed groups, sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, do not represent a serious concern either inside the armed group or while they go through the DDR program - the government provides them with health coverage for birth control methods and sexual preservatives (G. Villegas, personal communication, March 25, 2014).

Girls' redefinition of roles is also present in regard to their life expectations. This group of girls, who were primarily raised in the countryside, have begun to change their minds in respect to their roles as workers and mothers, as well as to the timing at which they will pass into new stages of their lives. They are visualising plans and goals that go beyond getting married and having children at an early age, which is the path that girls in

the countryside commonly take - and that their families expect them to take - after school. Although not easily achievable, attending college is now an option. Due to poor public education, the possibility of going to college in the countryside is very unlikely; in fact, the opportunity in the cities is also limited to a very small proportion of people. However, girls at the CAE Ciudad Don Bosco have the chance to continue their studies in technical or professional programs, if they meet the standard requirements. During our conversations, the girls affirmed their desire to complete their studies and obtain a stable job before getting married and having children. The CAE offers the girls a world of opportunities they did not have before, not even before joining the armed group. This is most likely the main reason for them to continue their process of reintegration. No matter how they demobilised, whether they were apprehended or voluntarily demobilised, many of them decide to stay at the CAE until they turn 18 years of age.

Demobilised individuals over 14 years old are free to leave the program whenever they so choose. During my six months of fieldwork, two girls out of fifteen left the program prematurely and one more left but returned to the CAE a week later. The motivations to give up the program are diverse. Usually withdrawal episodes occur when girls are experiencing emotional crises due to conflicts inside the CAE, sanctions imposed when they misbehave - suspension of internet, television or calls - or when they feel they are not able to be apart from their relatives any longer. In a few cases, the girls compare their lives in the guerrilla group to their lives at the CAE and express anger and frustrations that in the armed group they were allowed to have a cellular phone, handle more money or grab a beer when they were not in uniform. In their minds, that indicates that in the armed group they had more freedoms. Many factors converge to disillusion girls with their reintegration process, but most of them are able to face these fears and challenges and continue their process. Girls demonstrate an admirable capacity to deal with their past and look into their future. In the next chapter there is an in-depth analysis of the way these girls exercised their agency and found strategies to survive and keep going. The first section of the chapter discusses victimisation and agency, and highlights the importance of looking at minors as individuals with the capacity to make choices. The following section present real situations in which they used their agency abilities. The last section describes current girls' concerns, needs and expectations.

CHAPTER 5   WHAT DO THE VOICES OF FORMER GIRL SOLDIERS TELL US ABOUT AGENCY?

It is essential to consider minors, not as isolated passive individuals, but instead as agents who, depending on the circumstances, are able to make choices and participate in the transformation of their present and their future. What is more, they can be active participants in society and impact not only their own reality, but also the lives of others (Acosta, Agbrysch & Góngora, 2007, p. 33). By recognising this reality and promoting social, political and economic conditions for these individuals to make decisions on their own, national public institutions and society in general would be on the right track to supporting a process of empowerment.

When the girls of this research lived as combatants and faced circumstances of extreme violence, they displayed a great capacity to cope with those experiences and survive. However, as McKay and Mazurana (2004) argue, "it is essential that the coping strategies and resilience demonstrated by them not be mistaken for empowerment" (p. 120). Although the exercise of agency is an essential component of empowerment, the concept goes beyond just this. It is not simply about making decisions on how to survive life-threatening events; it is a more complex process which involves the control of available resources and the influence on social structures with the aim of undoing negative constructions that undermine girls' development (Rowlands, 1997, p. 14). Rowlands (1997), Batliwala (1993), and Young (1988) all emphasise the collective dimension of empowerment, since structural social changes would not be possible through the mere intervention of individual initiatives. Young describes this concept as "individual change and collective action" (Young 1988, as cited in Rowlands, 1997, p. 26). Batliwala highlights that in addition to the change in individuals' mentality, social groups around these individuals must recognise and respond to these changes (Batliwala 1993, as cited in Rowlands, 1997, p. 23).

In order to analyse the specific context of the girls who participated in this research, through the lens of empowerment, it is important to explore first, why girls should not only be considered victims of the armed conflict. Then, how girls controlled the resources they had at their disposal and how they addressed their social relationships, in order to

exercise their agency and reach their goals. Finally, what the girls' current situation is, to what extent their mindset has evolved, and what their ideals presently are.

5.1 AGENCY OR COERCION: A DISCUSSION ABOUT BEING VICTIMS OR INDIVIDUALS CAPABLE OF MAKING DECISIONS

"The discussion regarding minors recruited by armed groups that operate outside of the law illustrates the shocking idiosyncrasies of the dehumanization of war. It also demonstrates the lack of social, familial and economic structures that have prevented the development of minors in an appropriate environment, transforming minors into victims of an affliction of unsuspected dimensions" (Constitutional Court of Colombia, C-203/05)

Children and adolescents, defined by Colombian law as individuals under 18 years old, who were involved in the operation of non-state armed groups are considered victims of the armed conflict in this country. According to the Attorney General (2005), given the lack of alternatives for some minors to choose a different path, their recruitment into non-state armed groups - despite cases in which the decision appears to be voluntarily - is considered coerced. For this reason, the state's responsibility is to protect minors and provide them with adequate assistance (C-203/05). Along the same lines, Springer's (2012) report states that violence promotes dynamics which alienate communities' rights and freedoms. Moreover, the report highlights that child soldiers' recruitment exists because there is an armed conflict in progress; if it did not exist, children would not run such a risk. Therefore the recruitment of children into armed groups cannot be qualified as a voluntary act (p. 10). Springer indicates that during her fieldwork, 81% of children reported they had voluntarily joined the armed group. However, upon analysing the circumstances in which children lived, it was concluded that the minors' decision of joining the group was far from being voluntarily (p. 30).

According to Springer and her research team, children do not have the intellectual maturity to make that decision in total freedom. She argues that recruitment is an act of force facilitated by the social and economic vulnerability in the communities (p. 31). Furthermore, Springer points out that even though the direct responsibility of the non-

state armed groups in the recruitment of children is widely accepted, the responsibility of the state should not be overlooked. The state's inefficiency has caused the unequal conditions that still prevail in Colombian society, making the mission of the rebels easier when recruiting children (p. 10).

Sandra Ruiz (2002), in *"Armed Conflict, childhood and youth: a psychosocial perspective"*, also makes reference to the recruitment of child soldiers as a coerced decision. Ruiz argues that there is no will when there are no options to choose from; when the environment does not offer an alternative to war. According to Ruiz, children and adolescents participate in conflict because they do not have a different choice for survival (p. 23). Machel (2001) also argues that it is wrong to consider children's act of joining an armed group as voluntary. She points out that "rather than exercising free choice, these children are responding more often to a variety of pressures – economic, cultural, social and political" (p.11).

When applying these arguments to the experiences lived by the girls who participated in this research, the conclusion is that these girls did not have many alternatives from which to choose. All of them lived in a hostile environment where violence in both the private and the public spheres was present in daily life. Moreover, these environments were such that the economic deprivations obstructed the social well-being of communities and for this reason, as Sen (1999) would say, hindered the development of individuals' capabilities and the enjoyment of people's freedoms (pp. 75, 87). It is a reality that these girls did not have many choices, and that their decision to join an armed group was not a real informed decision, since they were not at all aware of the full range of the implications and actions they had to undertake once in the armed group. Therefore, the argument of child soldiers as victims of the armed conflict is irrefutable. However, the recognition of these children as victims does not exclude another aspect of the same reality: children's capacity to exercise agency, even under extreme conditions. They are neither passive nor defenceless individuals, they are agents. "Children are most than just persons in a state of becoming. They are persons in a state of being" (Drumbl, 2012, p. 208). In fact, Drumbl (2012) argues that the benefits derived from child soldiers' status of mere victims may distort the way they see themselves (p. 37). They may portray "individual agency by representing themselves as powerless

victims [therefore] hiding… actions in passive victimhood and reaping the benefit of other people's pity" (Utas 2006, as cited in Drumbl, 2012, p. 37).

The treatment of child soldiers as victims is associated with the effort of the national and international communities to protect individuals' freedoms, as Human Security suggests: "freedom from fear and freedom from want and safety" (The United Nations, 2009, p.17). From the legal perspective, Mark Drumbl (2012) cites Pacifique Maniraquiza (2009) to explain that the prevailing view in international law is "that minors who have committed international crimes, such as genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes, are victims of the adults who recruited them and are not legally culpable" (p. 133). However, solely considering the paternalistic view of child soldiers as victims of the conflict to address this social issue would lead to overlooking important aspects. Drumbl states that the victim imagery of children as faultless individuals is not coherent with some of the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in which children are seen as "autonomous agents often able to make decisions and choices on their own" (Simmons 2009, as cited in Drumbl, 2012, p. 208).

In order to explain why children can also be considered as perpetrators, Drumbl (2012) uses arguments such as the concept of 'tactical agency' developed by Honwana (2006). According to this concept, child soldiers display a tactical agency to deal with the military environment, and although they do not enjoy a position of power and are not aware of the ultimate goals of their behaviours either, they are "fully conscious of the immediate returns and they act, within certain constraints, to seize opportunities that are available to them" (p. 96). Moreover, Drumbl (2005) cites Wessells (2004) to stay that there are - very few - children who learn to enjoy combat and learn to enjoy killing, as some adults do as well (p. 89). Then, how will these children come to terms with their past violent acts in a society that condemns violence while simultaneously suggesting that, as victims, they simply dismiss their own violent acts? It is essential to highlight that Drumbl does not deny the status of victims of child soldiers. His argument is that the generalisation of children as either victims or perpetrators is wrong. "It would be preferable to appreciate heterogeneity within the protected group rather than assume bland homogeneity" (p. 94). Along these lines, he points out that former child soldiers who commit acts of atrocity should not be judged in trials, but instead, participate in

"restorative, reintegrative, and rehabilitative justice mechanisms" such as "truth commissions, welcoming ceremonies, cleansing rituals, or community service" (p. 133). These restorative justice mechanisms facilitate the reparation of the affected communities (p. 209). It is an instrument of social reconciliation that benefits both, the former child soldier and the society as a whole.

Addressing this point from a psychoanalysis perspective, I cite Maria Clemencia Castro, director of the Observatory on the Colombian DDR, who has written several publications on children and youth in conflict from a psychoanalytical view. This discipline offers supporting arguments to explain why the analysis of children's agency, when performing as soldiers is relevant. Although psychoanalysis does not deny the influence of external factors on children and adolescents' minds, it states that despite external influences, children and adolescents are subjects. "There is always a subjective responsibility to implicate themselves in their actions" (Castro, 2003, p. 1). With regard to this perspective, Diego Arias, one of the psychologist at the CAE, said:

"To me, both stances are completely clear. The legal side states that a person under 18 years old is a victim. There's no point of debate. It is defined that if I am 17 years and 364 days old and I decided to demobilise, I am a victim. But if I am 18 years and one day old, I am a perpetrator [...]. However, from the social, cultural and psychological aspect, one may perceive that, in spite of some individuals having joined the group ignorant of the consequences, for others the group was a personal election for a military life" (personal communication, November 15, 2013).

Chronological age is an important aspect to be considered and reconsidered when it comes to analysing the experiences that children and adolescents have throughout life. According to Christina Clark-Kazak (2009), the social realities in which children and adolescents live are not adequately studied when the age of these individuals is exclusively measured from a chronological view (p. 1307). "Definitions based on chronological age [...] overlook social constructions of childhood and youth: the biological facts of physical development have differing socio-political implications depending on context" (James et al., 1998, as cited in Clark-Kazak, 2009, p. 1309). The

work of Clark-Kazak presents an interesting analysis through which she argues that as it is a mistake to assume that all women live the same experiences just because of their biology, it is also wrong to generalise children's experiences, due to their chronological age. In this sense, she concludes that it is relevant to complement chronological age assessment, with a social age analysis through which, both children's physical development and their roles in society are studied within the specificities of the local contexts where they live - social, economic and political processes - and the relationships they establish (pp. 1310, 1320). Clark-Kazak points out that children and adolescents are not isolated individuals, on the contrary, they make up part of structures in societies and have active roles in social relationships that are also connected to different generations (p. 1308). Therefore, if localised constructions of childhood, youth, and adulthood are well understood, the strategies to address children's needs may promote more sustainable processes of development, in which children themselves can be considered agents (p. 1320).

Regarding the aspect of chronological age from a psychoanalytical lens Castro (2002) explains that psychoanalysis separates from the chronology of life and focuses on the rationale of the subjective positioning (p. 79). She recognises that children and adolescents belong to a social structure that offers them different possibilities, but it is their personal characteristics which allow them to position themselves before those offerings (Castro, 2003, p. 1). Psychoanalytical perspectives, similar to those of GAD, observe individuals in relation to a social structure and focus the positioning of every person in society. This discipline does accept the influence of external elements which may become unconscious determinants at the moment of making decisions. However, the fundamental point is the analysis of how the person positions him/herself before the diverse scenarios. "There is always an election, a subjective consent and a benefit" (p. 83).

In the specific case of the girls who participated in this research, ignoring the fact that the conditions of violence and poverty under which they lived made them join an armed group would not be justified. As Springer indicates, if the armed conflict did not exist in Colombia, the girls would not have gone to an armed group. They are victims of the social conditions that their context offered them. However, these girls feel that joining

an armed group was their choice. Eleven girls expressed that they could have said no to the option of belonging to an armed group. Some of these girls have sisters or brothers who lived under the same conditions but did not join the group. Maria, for instance, said "*when I see my little brother I think: he liked guns but decided not to join the group; while I chose joining them although guns terrified me.*" For these girls it was not an informed choice, since they were not totally aware of what they were going to go through. However, among all constraints, they were not physically and psychologically threatened by the armed group and that is why they consider their initiative to be a member of the group as their own decision. What I want to draw attention to, is that besides the recognition of their status as victims, it is also important to listen to their voices and make them feel they are heard as well. Brett (2003a) argues that this has to do with youth's psychological process: "if someone takes responsibility for their actions, it is not necessarily helpful or appropriate to tell them that they had no choice, or that they were not entitled to take the decisions they did because they were under-age" (p. 5). Castro (2002) states that the denial of their accountability produces negative emotional consequences (p. 78). Psychologist Arias, for instance, stated the importance of addressing the consequences of children's decisions during their therapies:

> *"For those who this issue is emotionally problematic, the plan of action would head toward helping them to take responsibility for their acts [...]. That they have the capacity to understand that in spite of what law says, they assume themselves responsible for their decision" (personal communication, November 15, 2013).*

Castro (2002) argues that society does not take into account the perspective of considering children and adolescents as individuals who are accountable for their actions, which, to a certain extent, is a mistake. In the legal and social settings, there is a definitive aim to protect and safeguard children by naming them 'victims', highlighting their innocence and exonerating them from the responsibility for their acts. Castro indicates that such a way of treating these individuals result in the denial of their condition as subjects (p. 78). The negative effects of this include the reoccurrence of children's and adolescents' experiences as memories that provoke anguish and feelings of solitude. "It would always be a failed attempt, since [the experience] will return to the

subject with the impetus of what was silenced; it will return claiming for a possible position in the symbolic realm" (Castro, 2002, p. 78). For this reason, instead of advising children and adolescents to disregard the responsibility for their past actions, psychoanalysis mediates between the biological maturity and the social and legal immaturity, and asks the individual to assume the particularities of his/her story, and deal with his/her singular actions (p. 79).

In the specific case of children's and adolescents' participation in the Colombian conflict, Castro (2002) states that many of them are individuals who, despite their young age, had to leave childhood behind prematurely (p. 77). The testimonies of the girls who participated in this research are undoubtedly a justification of Castro's statement; these girls had to take on adult roles at a very early age. Castro (2002) explains that when children and adolescents free themselves from their parents' authority they start untying their childhood bonds and face new social settings where the relation to law is critical (p. 80). Every individual has a particular way to face the entry to society and to establish the bonds with others (p. 82).

In this process, identity plays a key role. According to Castro (2002), children and adolescents, who join an armed group, free themselves from the first authority they recognised when they were born; then they decide to challenge the legal system and to adhere to a non-state authority that offers them an affiliation and a sense of belonging (p. 84). They give up a great part of their identities, their personal stories and, their family ideals. They begin to build new identities under new names. Even a name, the most intimate characteristic that identifies every person in society has to disappear in these armed groups (Castro, 2001, p. 51). All the 13 girls mentioned, in our conversations, the moment in which they had to choose a different name. *"I remember that I was going to give them my name, but they covered my mouth and told me: 'don't give us your civilian name, make one up"* Luisa recounted. On her first day in the guerrilla group, Catalina heard the commander say: *"you have to change your name here; we have to protect your identity."* Susana also recalled the moment: *"think of a different name, we can't use yours."* In this sense, Castro explains that under the collective support, the subject can avoid the feeling of guilt that may provoke any violent act he/she commits (p. 67). While their new names are useful inside the groups for them to be identified, the group as a

whole is homogenised and undifferentiated (p. 61). Their responsibilities are dissolved in the collective entity (Castro, 2002, p. 86).

Some of the girls felt protected under the anonymity of the collective entity and became excited about the power of weapons and passionate about war (p. 85). Ana, for example, did not consider life without a gun, *"I was sanctioned three times by being disarmed; that demoralised me. When that happened I used to say: I can't live without the rifle, I can't live without it. I stopped eating until they gave it to me again"*. Sara also felt attached to the arm she was given *"a rifle makes you feel important [...]. One day they took my rifle away from me as a sanction for having screamed when I saw a worm. That day we were allowed to go dancing, but I was ashamed for not having my gun. Everybody was looking at me"*. Castro (2001) affirms that for members of an armed group, a gun is an extension of their bodies. It magnifies the individuals and gives meaning to their being (p. 127).

Despite the traumatic experiences, most of the girls did not express regret regarding their lives in the armed group. The great majority recognised frequently experiencing moments of joy, especially when socialising with their comrades:

- *"I did not get bored while being in the guerrilla" Melisa*
- *"The truth is that I do not regret having been there" Monica*
- *"One always makes good friends in the guerrilla" Maria*
- *"I liked being there. I had everything I needed" Susana*
- *"We used to party a lot, it was fun" Vanessa*
- *"When they decided not to do the 'war trial' against me, they told me: 'we're going to release you, but you won't be a guerrilla member anymore; you should go home.' I started crying, I told myself: 'I prefer to be killed than to go back home.' When they were going to take me home, I begged the commander, I knelt before him. Then he told me: 'Ok! Stay'." Luisa*

Castro (2002) affirms that these minors "mix together their games with the grandeur of being warriors […]. They move to adult life under the protection of the warlike collective. However, in other moments, they regret the harshness and demands of the rigid discipline this life entails" (p. 1). This situation justifies the fact that girls' decision to join an armed group was not a real informed decision. Except for Luisa, who

said that she would like to be back in the armed group, these girls do not think of returning to the military life in the armed group. Even though they enjoyed some moments as girls-soldiers, it is clear in their minds that they do not want to repeat the experience. In fact, some of them revealed they changed their minds when, living as girl soldiers, they realised how life in the armed group was in reality. Unfortunately, it was too late to say no. When these individuals, who wanted to be free from parents' authority, faced the reality of life in the military - the discipline and the roughness of war - they recognised the mistake they made. In light of such a disappointing situation, the person has to deal with new uncertainties and anguishes (Castro, 2002, p. 88), as Laura did. Laura became aware of the new reality once she had to deal with hunger, trainings, long walks, and sanctions; in addition, she missed her family. *"I told myself: 'I'm not made for this.' It was hard. But I was not to say it to the group because I was afraid of being killed."* She was so desperate that she preferred dying than staying in the group. That is why she volunteered to go into combat, despite not having experiencing it before: *"I wanted to be killed, I was praying to God to be killed in combat, I did not want to be there anymore [...]. When the fighting began, I ran away and went back to the camp. I couldn't face it."* Fortunately, life gave Laura an opportunity to leave some weeks later.

All these children knew that any attempt to escape could lead them to a very serious sanction, even death. So while living in the armed group, they learnt to deal with their circumstances, make use of the limited resources at their disposal and make choices in order to survive and, in some cases, to have access to some benefits. Then, those girls who wanted to escape, did it right at the moment they found the opportunity. They did not stay passive, they demonstrated a great capacity to analyse their alternatives and make choices. The girls who were convinced by their relatives to leave the group, also made a choice. Finally those who were apprehended realised that they had more opportunities in the DDR program. Now Laura and her peers refuse to consider the idea of going back to the group because they are undergoing a process of reintegration in which they are visualising more options for their futures. Furthermore, attending the program becomes an essential stage in girls' lives for them to reconstruct their new reality. Staying at the program is also a choice for them, they are not forced to be there.

The recognition of minors' capacity to make decisions has a great impact on the way they are treated through their process of reintegration. The UNICEF's review of the Machel study (2009), for instance, although agrees with Machel's observation regarding the misleading perception of children's recruitment as voluntary, also recognises the need to comprehend the reasons behind children's participation in war. What the report points out as a relevant action is the analysis of children's participation in armed conflicts "as a consequence of some degree of choice" (p. 38) in order to identify key elements for their reintegration process planning. The report mentions three important aspects: 1) "Addressing the experiences, frustrations, needs and aspirations that move children to participate in violence is vital in transitioning away from conflict." 2) "The knowledge, skills, strengths and identities that children acquire through participation in political violence […] can be put to beneficial use in peacetime." 3) "Inclusive and appropriate processes of transitional justice and peacebuilding are part of reintegrating war-affected children" (p. 38).

In conclusion, it is appropriate and necessary to recognise child soldiers as victims of the armed conflict in order to address, at legal and psychological levels, their needs. These children, based on their circumstances, did not make an informed choice when joining an armed group; moreover, despite the fact that some of them were involved in crimes against humanity, they should not be subjects to criminal trials. Simultaneously, the recognition of these children, not as defenceless individuals but as agents capable of making decisions in favor of their wellbeing, and, to a certain extent, responsible for their actions, is crucial as well. As Drumbl (2012) states, "oppression, after all, does not axiomatically void the oppressed's capacity for decision-making" (p. 17). Listening to these child soldiers' voices may result in better process of reintegration and reconciliation with society.

5.2 Capacity of girls to cope with life even under extreme social conditions

Girl's experiences in conflict are diverse. Even though traditional gender roles do play a part in shaping their behaviours, the difficulty and strain of conflict also creates pressure to break traditions and adopt more unconventional roles that influence their

social interactions with men as well as other women. In extreme situations like war, girls exercise their agency in creative ways, sometimes purely with the aim of surviving (Denov & Gervais, 2007, p. 895). The studies conducted by Denov, Gervais and Maclure (2006 and 2007), give prominence to girls' capacity to exercise agency and emphasise resourcefulness as a key personal characteristic for girls to be able to face the circumstances they have to live through during armed conflicts.

When discussing girls' stories in Sierra Leone, Denov and Maclure (2006) affirm that the traumatic stories "reveal a spirit of volition and a capacity for independence of action that counters a deterministic and commonly held depiction of girls as supine victims with no capacity to resist or to modify the circumstances imposed upon them" (p. 81). Similar to former girl soldiers in Sierra Leone, the thirteen former girl soldiers who participated in this research demonstrated a remarkable capacity to face their extreme experiences autonomously. Although all of the girls experienced a similar context of violence, they all have incredibly distinct personalities. As Denov and Gervais (2007) note in their study, the physical and psychological characteristics of the individual girls made every case unique (p. 902). All of them displayed a great ability to exercise agency in specific situations. Going back to Long's (1992) concept of agency, these girls had "the capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion" (as cited in Moser & Clark, 2005, p.5).

When discussing agency, the studies by Denov and Maclure (2006) and Denov and Gervais (2007) identified specific personal characteristics which described the girl soldiers' capacity of facing the armed conflict in Sierra Leone. The girls in this study presented similar qualities that gave them the strength to overcome the consequences of participating directly in the Colombian armed conflict. Girls' sense for survival and protection, desire for recognition and power, capacity to resist violence, determination, ability for negotiation and capacity to overcome obstacles and reach reconciliation were the main characteristics. As Denov and Gervais (2007) highlighted, even though these girls had alternatives to choose from when exercising agency, while in the armed group their agency mainly took a defensive form (p. 901). In the words of Kabeer (1999), these girls defined their goals and acted upon them; moreover, their actions took form of "bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance, as

well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis" (p. 438). The following girls' stories illustrate these particular qualities.

a. **Survival and Protection:** girls' instinctual sense for survival and protection of themselves and their loved ones is among the characteristics they displayed while living under extreme conditions of violence. For instance, although Catalina had the opportunity to surrender after the national army attacked the group she belonged to, she decided not to turn herself in because she thought the soldiers would have mistreated her: *"I was scared because I was told that when soldiers found girls, they raped them. I hid in a trunk and covered my hands and feet with leaves."* She preferred to find a different moment to escape. Carolina was at one time the partner of a commander, but she gave up the benefits she could have received by ending the relationship with him when she realised how violent he became when he was jealous of his partners: *"I broke up with him because if I had had sexual relations with him and then he had seen me chatting with another guy, he would have killed me."* Sandra, who grew up with the constant and direct influence of guerrilla members - a couple took after her - got pregnant while in the guerilla group. Since she knew she would have been forced to abort, she decided to hide her pregnancy for eight months: *"I always wore a loose sweater [...]. During the eighth month I went home with the troops. I told them that I was pregnant, that I was not going to abort, and that I would prefer to die rather than to abort."* She was allowed to have her baby, but she was not allowed to keep him with her after the birth. Her parents took care of the child and she had to return to the group in order to protect her child and her other relatives: *"to be back was like an obligation to me; otherwise, I would have put my family at risk."*

Another strategy used by Maria, Monica, Carolina, Susana and Sandra, in order to protect themselves and their families, was concealing information at the moment of being illegally interrogated by members of the national army. Monica became angry when the soldiers began the interrogation and told them, *"stop asking so many questions and get me a pill for my headache."* Sandra, whose relatives were still in the armed group, stated: *"I never told them anything. I told myself: 'if I talk about them [her comrades], I will be talking about my family'."* Carolina, who was intimidated by the soldiers, made them

believe she was cooperating: *"they told me that if I didn't help them, they wouldn't help me either, and I would have to leave the military base [...].They questioned me about coordinates, so I gave them the wrong indications."* Susana did the same: *"they asked me about the commander; if it was true that the commander was injured. I nodded and told them that she was dying. But I lied to them because she was OK."* As stated by Yvonne Keairns in her work *"The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers"* in which the Colombian case was studied, "these girls exhibited a strong sense of self or they would not have survived [...]. They often acted fearless when terrified, and stood up for themselves in the face of brutal treatment and consequences" (Keairns, 2002 as cited in Brett, 2003b, p. 5).

b. **Desire for Recognition and Power:** some of the girls considered weapons to be the means to achieve status and respect from others. The case of Luisa is unique since she was the only one who expressed desire to go back to the armed group, even after spending several months in the DDR program. As a girl soldier, Luisa enjoyed the respect she said she inspired among the civilians. When she was apprehended, she told one of the soldiers: *"I'll make something clear: I'm not here because I deserted, I'm not a traitor. I'm here because your peers captured me."* When she was recounting her story, she admitted the pride she felt for having gained her commander's confidence. The commander was also a woman and she used to encourage Luisa to keep up her good behaviour, so that she could help her to be promoted in the guerrilla's military rank. As Keairns accurately highlighted, "[some girl soldiers] wanted to be someone and they longed to be valued" (Keairns, 2002 as cited in Brett, 2003b, p. 5). The only motivation for Luisa to stay in the DDR program is her little sister. Although she desires to be back in the armed group, she does not want her sister to follow her and join it. She said that was not a good life for her sister.

c. **Capacity to Resist Violence:** despite the hostile environment the girls lived in, Melissa and Vanessa found ways to avoid using weapons or participating as perpetrators in specific situations of violence. Vanessa, on one occasion, was sent by her commander to kill a female adolescent, but she refused: *"I told him that I was not able to do that. She was a girl like me, I could not do it."* Although she used to bring a gun with her and knew

how to handle it, she would not use it against a girl of her same age. Melissa, on the contrary, had not handled guns before. When a comrade first offered a gun to her, she was scared but she knew she had to accept it: *"the only thing I did was to grab it and put it into a plastic bag; then I buried it."*

Resisting sexual violence was also a circumstance that some girls faced. When Luisa and Laura felt threatened that they may be sexually abused, they found ways to avoid the assaults. Rape was forbidden in the armed group, and Luisa confronted her assaulter: *"if you rape me I will kill you; I know I would have to leave if I kill you, but at least the commander would know what happened. If you rape me, you will be reported."* Laura had recently been informed she was being relocated to a new camp and became aware that her commander wanted to have sexual relations with her before she left, but she avoided the situation: *"the day of the party we began to drink rum. He wanted me to be drunk, but I drank one shot, and then threw away the following one; I drank another one, and threw away the following one. That way I did not get drunk. I knew what his intentions were."* Even though Ana did not explicitly state that she felt sexually threatened, when she was frustrated with her commander hitting on her, she pointed her gun at him to let him know his advances were not welcome.

Laura and Carolina challenged their commanders as well. During training Laura dared to insult and throw a wooden rifle at a commander when he hit her for not doing the exercise correctly and for not treating the rifle as her mother. Carolina was scolded when her commander realised that instead of watching over the camp, she and her comrade - a nine-year-old boy - were shooting birds:

> *"The commander told me in front of everyone: 'I swore not to kill again, but the day this girl screws it up again, I'll cut her throat by myself' [...]. I was not scared but angry, so I replied: you all are morons. You're not grateful to a person who has served you as a slave."*

When most of these girls realised that their lives as combatants were not what they expected - after one or two years performing as soldiers - they were brave enough to abandon the armed group. After Carolina discovered she was going to be sent to a "war-trial", she decided to escape. Ana, Angy, Carolina and Catalina accepted the offer of one

or two comrades who wanted to escape as well. Sara escaped by herself. She and her comrade were sent to collect explosives, and she saw it as the perfect moment to abandon the group. She was mentally prepared to kill her peer, but, an opportunity arose at the last minute and she ran away without her gun. Laura, who did not see any chance to escape, was willing to be killed and volunteered to go into combat. As previously mentioned, at the moment the fighting began, she was scared and went back to the camp. A week later she contracted malaria so she was taken to the nearest hospital. Since her condition was grave, she was transferred to a hospital in the capital: *"that disease saved my life"*, she said. Initially, Maria did not want to leave the group, but she decided not to return after spending some time at home reflecting with her mother.

> *"I told my mother: 'mom, I don't want to go back, I don't want to help the guerrillas; I don't want to have anything else to do with armed people.' It's like when you want a pair of shoes so badly and you wear them only once; then you don't want them anymore. That was the way I was feeling."*

Even though these girls knew they were putting their lives in danger, they had the capacity to react and avoid being victimised or engaging in violent acts (Denov & Maclure, 2006, p. 81). "Apart from being highly functional means to protect themselves, these modes of resistance enabled the girls to assert, however minutely, their individual agency with the aim to subvert the culture of violence" (Denov & Maclure, 2006, p. 80). These girls did not have a person or an institution to protect them from threats and abuses; they had to deal with violence by themselves.

d. **Determination:** whether showing determination before, during or after their time in the guerilla, these girls all shared the amazing ability to imagine a goal and pursue it by any means. Melissa and Vanessa had a clear goal in their minds when entering the guerilla group: they wanted to see their siblings who had previously joined the armed group. In both cases, when they joined the guerrilla group, they managed to operate within its structures without telling their relatives about their involvement. Melissa never left home because she became part of the militia performing military intelligence; therefore, allowing her to remain in her village the entire time. Her mother realised she was a

FARC member when she turned herself in to the national authority. Vanessa, who was a militia member as well, would occasionally leave home temporarily. When she was away, her mother thought Vanessa was working at her aunt's farm, where there was no telephone coverage. Indeed, Vanessa participated in one attack performed by the armed group in her village while her mother thought that she was asleep in her bed:

> *"At two in the morning the attack began. People ran across the streets. I blessed myself and then I started shooting […]. At the end, my comrades accompanied me home […].The following day, my mom said: 'did you realise what happened last night?' I said: 'yes, I heard a lot of noise'."*

As in Melissa's case, Vanessa's mother discovered her daughter was a militia member when she appeared before the authority. These two girls had the singular purpose of finding their siblings in the guerilla group and they tried to achieve their goal by any means necessary. Even though they did not succeed in seeing them while in the armed group, their actions demonstrated a strong sense of determination. Vanessa had the opportunity to see her sister when her sister was captured and sent to jail. After serving her sentence, she returned to the armed group. Now Vanessa understands that her sister's ideals are different from her own, however she respects what her sister wants: *"My sister wants to be a commander […]. I stopped thinking about her situation. If she wants to stay there, it's up to her."*

e. **Ability for Negotiation:** in the midst of the conflict environment, some of the girls realised that through a relationship with a commander, they could gain access to privileges that they otherwise would not have. Angy explicitly recognised this in her decision to have a relationship with her commander:

> *"Let me tell you who the commander was. He was an old man with a white, long beard. What happened was that my life with him was more comfortable; I had privileges like being the first one to receive clothing or to eat the left-overs. People hardly ever bothered me."*

Keairns also identified similar situations in her fieldwork; she stated that girls knew "that their life would be easier if they were in a partner relationship with a commander. They had fewer duties to perform, they had privileges regarding supplies, […] and others granted [them] some respect" (Keairns, 2003, p. 12). When Laura's commander began to show an interest in her, she took advantage of this and asked him: *"If you like me, why don't you let me go home?"* Monica, who did genuinely like her commander and had a stable long relationship with him, asked him for his permission to go home as well. Monica was also aware that the life of a commander's partner was easier: *"we, as the commanders' women, did not have a tough life."*

Melissa also demonstrated her ability for negotiation, in this case, as a way to avoid being involved in crueler situations of violence. Since she had gained too much information about the armed group from the role she was performing in military intelligence, her commander in the militia told her she had to leave the militia and join the troops in the mountains. She did not want to leave home, so she asked him for some more time while her mother recovered from an illness. She knew she would be able to keep up that lie until she escaped. Even at the moment of her escape, she made use of the contacts she already had in the national army. Melissa was afraid of being sent to a 'war-trial', which is why she decided to use her contacts: *"the first time I talked to a soldier, he told me that in case I needed him, he would help me. I was scared so I called him […]. The following morning he and his peers helped me and took me out of the village."*

f. **Capacity to overcome obstacles and reach reconciliation:** These thirteen girls have undoubtedly lived through stressful and traumatic experiences in an environment of danger and inhumane treatment. However, they are demonstrating an admirable capacity to overcome these obstacles and gradually change the course of their lives.

A significant factor motivating their effort to change their lives is their family, despite the experiences of domestic violence. Monica, Susana and Maria, who initially did not want to leave the armed group, where persuaded by their relatives. They listened to the reasons why they should appear before the authorities and begin a process of reintegration into society. At first Susana did not agree, so her parents took her to the military base against her will, which is when she changed her mind: *"I had never seen my*

dad crying [...]. I was planning to escape and go back to the mountains, but I thought of my dad and I told myself that my escape would kill him, so I decided to stay." Four months into her process of reintegration, she now thinks:

> *"I like the program. Sometimes I get bored, but I know that one does not see the results right away, it takes time. Here I do not have to worry about rent or food, that's a privilege. When I'm told off, I get angry, but then I reflect and think: in the past, that could have been a gunshot"*

The main motivation for Sandra to continue in the reintegration process is her child. *"I will finish this process, I want to study and progress in life [...]. I'm here because of him, because of my son"*; Sandra explained she was separated from her child for two years, and even though she is able to see her son during family visits a few times a year now that she is in the DDR program, she still cannot be with him every day. When she gets sad, she writes him letters. She decided to share one of the letters and gave permission for a short fragment to be quoted:

> *"I know time will pass and everything will change. I hope he forgives me for these three years of absence. Because of war and violence I couldn't hear his first words, the sound of his laughter or his crying or saying mom or dad [...]. I know that, if God allows me, I will be the best mother ever [...]. If I could delete my past and everything I suffered for not being next to him, I would not think twice about it. Just as I myself would embrace life again"* (November 3, 2013)

Sandra is doing her best to succeed in her process, despite the fact that she cannot have her son with her every day. Fortunately she has the support of her parents, who are taking care of her child. Sara greatly values her family's emotional support as well. Occasionally she feels bad for having disappointed them by joining an armed group and believes she does not deserve their support. Nonetheless her mother encourages her to keep going: *"my mom says: 'sometimes you have to fall down and learn from mistakes.' I needed to fall down in order to be a better person"*, Sara shared.

The "Family Reunion Event" that the girls attend every year as a part of the reintegration program has very positive results on girls' spirit. It is the moment in which

they see their relatives and share quality time with them. It reflects how important family is to these girls and how their families support gives them courage. Carolina is a good example of what family's encouragement can do for the girls: *"I felt much better when my mom saw me and told me that I had a very positive attitude […]. Now I want to show my siblings that this crazy girl won't be the same one in the future."* It is very important for girls to be accepted by their families, and to feel that they were forgiven by those who they hurt, like Maria's case:

> *"When my brother came, he told me that he loved me; then he gave me a hug. I was not able to hug him back because I remembered when I pointed a gun at him. […]. Seeing him here gave me more confidence to keep going on."*

Reconciliation is essential in the girls' process of reintegration. Most of them assume responsibility for their actions, as Maria does: *"I know what I did and I know that I should make up for what I did."* Others, even if they did not have direct responsibility for their involvement in the group, have feelings of guilt. That is the case for Carolina: *"I feel bad because my sister joined the group in order to find me. Now she's dead."* When reconciliation becomes a part of their lives, it means not only that they can leave behind the feelings of guilt which have afflicted them for so long, but also that they can count on others while embarking on such a difficult pathway. Ungar (2008) highlights the importance of families, communities, and cultures as providers of the elements that children and youth who were exposed to psychological and environmental adversity need on their way to a life of well-being (as cited in Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009, p. 6). For these girls, the support of their families and their communities really makes a difference in their process.

The girls' sense of determination is also important when they are going through the reintegration process. Most of them have the conviction that it is important to remain in the DDR program. This is a crucial to their successful future outside of the conflict because they are still at risk of been re-recruited by armed groups either in rural or urban areas. One of the girls, for instance, was presented with an offer to join an urban armed group. Although she was tempted, in the end she rejected the offer. Another example of determination is illustrated by Monica. When she was sent to the 'transitory institution'

she decided to leave and give up the program's benefits: *"I packed my stuff and asked for the paperwork I had to sign, then I left [...]. During that time I tried things that I had never tried before."* She began to consume drugs and, since she was planning to go back to the armed group, she reinitiated contact with some guerrilla members. Nevertheless, she reflected and decided to go back to the DDR program. She has been a part of the program for almost a year and a half and now Monica realises her positive change: *"I feel that I've changed a lot, people at the CAE have helped me [...]. Now I don't consume any drugs, I made a promise to my brother and my mom. I don't know how I overcame [drugs] that fast."*

As Denov and Gervais (2007) state, "despite the horrors of armed conflict, some females find creative ways to bring about change by themselves and for themselves" (p. 902). These girls are agents of their own development; they have the ability to auto-control the resources that are available to them, and make decisions that impact their lives (Malhotra, 2002, p. 8). Some of them go beyond simply making change happen for themselves, but also want to positively impact others who suffered similar experiences.

It is important to recognise the capacity of girls to exercise their agency, to survive traumatic experiences and to be able to change the course of their lives. Now that they are going through a process of reintegration, it is essential to identify their concerns, needs and life expectations. These girls, who will soon be adults, have the capacity to build their future, but if the national government and the society in general do not acknowledge their real situation as a minority social group, their needs and life expectations will not be satisfactorily met. The next section explores these aspects in girls' present lives.

5.3 GIRLS' CONCERNS, NEEDS AND LIFE EXPECTATIONS

The girls involved in this study considerably value the program of reintegration in which they are participating. At present, they are living at the CAE in Medellin where they are provided with shelter, food and clothing. They also have access to education and healthcare, and attend activities for the correct use of their spare time. The professional team assists them with psychological counselling and academic support. Moreover, the social workers guide them through the process of family reunification. As mentioned in previous chapters, girls highly value the opportunity of going to school and attending

skill training programs as a way to become equipped with the required tools to economically reintegrate themselves into society and construct a sustainable life. However, despite the new opportunities they are currently having, in their minds there are still issues they worry about and needs - which compromise their present and their future - that are not being met yet.

5.3.1 Girls' concerns and needs

Although most of the girls desire to complete the entire process, that only has a true defined end of when they turn 18 years old, they often face conflicting emotional states, because of the unexpected longing to leave that occurs at points in the process. They look forward to having more freedom, to living a life in which they do not have to receive and obey orders. Often, it is as though they would like to fast-track the process, wanting to receive the psychological, educational and material benefits of their demobilization as soon as possible. It is relevant to highlight that at this stage they are simultaneously dealing with the traumas of their past together with the overwhelming new transitional life of which they have recently become a part of. On top of this, they are adapting to forty five new individuals - boys and girls - who coexist in the same physical space. This tight cohabitation can spur conflicts and anxieties. All these factors weigh on the girls' patience and they can begin to think of giving up. Fortunately, many have proved to be capable of overcoming their anxieties by reflecting on their behaviours and realising that a positive attitude toward their process is essential to succeed.

As observed in fieldwork, sometimes girls' peers - boys or girls - cause them to reflect on the decisions they are about to make. Peers can intervene in moments of crisis by teasing or by making jokes that break the anxiety of the person in crisis and make them smile. The girls gave permission to share an anecdote in which one of the girls reacted emotionally and severely after an argument she had. When she started packing her stuff, another girl immediately went to her and told her:

> *"Why are you leaving? Look, we both lived similar experiences and we both know*
> *how hard life is outside. Don't you see that you have everything here? Do you want*

to live in the street and beg people for food or money? Because you know that's
what you'll have to do […]. If that's what you really want, leave now then"

After this reflection, the girl calmed down and put her clothing back in the closet. Although the idea of leaving or staying at the CAE during the entire process is challenging for these girls, at moments of emotional instability, not only do the girls' relatives and the professional staff, but also the girls' peers at the CAE provide a source of support. The CAE is their second family; it becomes another essential node of the social network that provides each of them with support during their process of reintegration. Despite the arguments that arise due to the daily coexistence, friendship plays a key role in girls' lives. Since they do not count on the physical presence of their relatives every day because of geographical limitations, girls and boys take refuge in their friends.

Even though all girls have the opportunity to call their relatives every week and a few girls are able to visit them at least once a month, the contact girls have with their families is still insufficient. Almost all of them expressed the desire to see or call their relatives more often. Unfortunately, the need for more economic and human resources is one of the reasons the CAE must limit more family interaction. Family truly represents a significant concern in the girls' minds. First of all, they worry primarily about their relatives' safety. Except for in some cases of forced displacement, it is very common that girls' families still live in the same village where the girls joined the armed group. Some of these villages are considered conflict zones, since the military intervention of both the national army and the non-state armed groups is constant. During outbreaks of violence, civilians - including girls' relatives - can be the most affected. Furthermore, when the armed group tries to discover any information about the demobilised girls, their families are at risk of being directly contacted by the troop.

Another motive of girls' distress is the economic situation in which their relatives live. Some of the girls become distressed about the fact that while they have six meals a day, their families may have one or two. Even though they personally are not living a life of deprivation while at the CAE, most of their families are still living in situations of poverty, and such circumstances worries them a lot. Furthermore, they compare their educational opportunities to the lack of opportunities their siblings face. Undoubtedly,

poverty and inequity are social phenomena that are affecting many Colombians and these girls are directly living the consequences.

An additional concern in girls' minds is the likelihood that their younger siblings or their future children will follow in their footsteps. Maria, for instance, said: *"I would not want a child of mine to live half of the life I've lived."* Vanessa, making reference to a future child as well, said: *"I would not like if my child joined an armed group. I already lived that experience, and even though I liked it, it was not easy."* Afterwards, Vanessa expressed how she would avoid this happening: *"one should try to make sure that they [the kids] stay well, that they concentrate on their studies. Therefore, they would not think to join a group."*

It was interesting to realise that, contrary to some cases in which girl soldiers in Africa suffered from rejection by their communities and families (Denov & Maclure, 2006; McKay & Mazurana, 2004), girls at the CAE did not report such experiences. Indeed, during the recounting of their stories, some girls described how their communities welcomed them. While talking about this particular situation with the social worker at the CAE, I asked if boys were also welcomed by their families. According to her experience while working with demobilised minors, boys and girls are mostly accepted in their communities, except for the minors who belong to indigenous minorities. In this case, it is common that indigenous leaders - known as 'taitas' - exclude them from their communities and forbid them to go back.

Although experiences at the CAE in Medellin show that these children are welcomed back to their own communities, there is a possibility that when they leave the program and face the reality of been reintegrated into society rejection affects their lives. Most of the girls will have to reconstruct their lives far from the people who knew them since they were born. They will be far from the places where the armed conflict was part of the 'routine' and where belonging to an armed group was not an extraordinary circumstance. For instance, Denov and Ricard-Guay (2013), while in fieldwork in Colombia, interviewed two participants who reported having been rejected and excluded by people in her neighbourhood:

"My neighbour, a lady who was supposedly my friend, would call me 'guerrilla' in front of my son. My son would say: 'Mom, is it true that you are a guerrilla who has killed people?' (Interview, Colombia, 21 February 2011)" (p. 481).

"[A neighbour] would say I was a 'guerrillera' and the guys in the neighbourhood would send me threatening letters. One day they broke my window, and I was forced to move. (Interview, Colombia, 18 February 2011)" (p. 481).

In general terms, the Colombian society is not prepared to receive and welcome ex-combatants to their day to day lives. That is why, in the meanwhile, girls should be prepared to deal with possible situations of social exclusion. Part of the challenge is, on the one hand, that girls recognise themselves as former participants of the armed conflict; on the other hand, that society recognises and accepts these former participants in conflict as new social members.

A process of reintegration is not only about healing girls' pasts. It is also about being prepared for what they will have to go through in their future. That is why girls' needs, which are diverse, should be central in the planning of DDR programs. At a psychological level girls need to face their traumas as victims, and reflect on their acts as aggressors. As Castro suggests (2002), it is not beneficial for them to be treated only as victims and help them to "leave behind" their past without reflecting on it. They need to rationalise, internalise, and assume the responsibility for their acts. Scars, for example, are physical marks that bring memories back. It is easier for them to move forward when they manage to heal their feelings of guilt and understand why their actions are socially and legally repudiated. During fieldwork, most of the girls expressed regret for what they had done as perpetrators, but a few others qualified violent acts - including killings - as normal events in life. This kind of thinking could result in behaviour that would not only negatively affect minors' lives, but also their communities' tranquility. The commitment of the public institutions that lead the planning of DDR programs is not only to these child soldiers, but their commitment is also to the communities that will interact with them once they are reintegrated into society. For this reason, it is essential that girls comprehend their past and reassume social values that were not considered while acting as child soldiers. In this process, the psychological counselling, as well as the celebration

of rituals of reconciliation and other spiritual activities are fundamental mechanisms used by the professional team at the CAE, for these children to reflect on their past experiences. As previously stated, religion is not an aspect that considerably influences girls' lives, in spite of the importance that their families in the rural areas, where most of them come from, place on Catholicism and other Christian faiths. Ciudad Don Bosco, although is a Catholic Salesian community, respects the position that every minor takes regarding religion and other cultural practices. Therefore, when it comes to the celebration of these rituals, the focus of the team at the CAE heads toward the spiritual dimension of the individual in general (D. Arias, personal communication, March 25, 2014).

Throughout their reintegration process, girls' affective state is also crucial. As stated by Acosta, Agbrysch and Góngora (2007), minors involved in armed groups have to take on adult roles very early, and consequently, at a psycho-affective level, they do not pass through psychological processes that are normally developed at this age. As a result, sometimes girls react immaturely when they have to deal with frustrations and anger, and also when they have to solve problems in non-violent ways (p. 51). Based on my interactions with the girls, I realised that they often portrayed themselves as strong individuals who did not need demonstrations of affection; however, a simple hug immediately undid the barrier they had built. All of these girls need affection; they need to be valued and loved by people around them. Positive interactions with others benefit their self-confidence and their self-esteem. Nydia Quiroz from UNICEF Colombia (1999), for instance, published a document on psychoaffective recovery of children affected by disasters and armed conflict, in which it stated that even though family is the main and most appropriate social unit for children to overcome psychoaffective issues, their interactions with other young people - older than them - also help them to recover their emotional stability (p. v).

The relationship between former child soldiers and police officers or soldiers from the national army is also a crucial element in the process of reintegration of minors. Police officers and soldiers were the child soldiers' enemy, so it is very hard for these minors to see their former opponents as people who will not hurt them or people who they can respect. This factor is especially important in the case of girls, since this enemy

was often portrayed as inflicting rape or torture by the armed groups. Those girls who actually suffered from physical abuses by soldiers - in violation of the law - have strong-rooted negative feelings against the institution as a whole. With regard to this issue, Castro (2001) argues that former child soldiers' "immersion into social life, as citizens, implies both the ending of the configuration of the enemy, and the willingness to have a dialogue with them" (p. 140). The CAE in Medellin adopted an excellent strategy in order to help boys and girls change their perceptions regarding the public force. Every week a carabineer - a member of the rural police - visits the CAE and helps boys and girls to grow crops in a mini-farm that is located at the backyard of the house. I personally found this strategy a very effective one for these children to socialise with police officers. It is a way to promote the dialogue that Castro recommends. Simple initiatives like this one really make a large difference in minors' process of reintegration.

Physical safety is an additional necessity in girls' lives. In spite of the fact that the girls have ended their roles as child soldiers, they are still in danger due to their previous connections. The most dangerous risk they run when they abandon the program is their vulnerability to be re-recruited. The conflict in Colombia is still ongoing, so the guerrilla groups are still operating. Moreover, the failures in the reintegration process of paramilitary groups in 2006 resulted in the new configuration of urban criminal gangs which have proliferated across the country. As Springer (2012) states, these gangs are yet another non-state force that is using child recruitment in Colombia (p. 9). Since these girls have already been trained, they represent a qualified workforce to these armed groups.

Their safety is also threatened by being objects of persecution. Some of these girls had access to critical information related to the groups' operations. This fact makes them the target of violent attacks by the armed group they belonged to. Although the designation to a CAE which is not physically located close to the region where these girls operated diminishes the risk, there is still a possibility of being identified. One of the means through which they can be located is social media such as Facebook. Social media is undoubtedly a source of risk. Girls have access to internet, and as any other adolescent, they enjoy the opportunity to socialise and to be in contact with their relatives. However, considering that Facebook is used worldwide and has location features, girls, and

demobilised minors in general, can be easily tracked. On this specific matter, girls do not always take into consideration consequences.

5.3.2 Girls' life expectations

Despite girls' fears, psychological challenges and material limitations, they still have the capacity to devise a future. "They are now moving on with their lives. Their experiences have taught them both positive and negative lessons that they may selectively return to as they confront future challenges" (McKay & Mazurana, 2004, p. 121). To have access to higher education, to get a good job and to form a family are the most common main goals girls devise for the years following their DDR process, like most young people. When asked how they pictured their future, many of them remembered their relatives' lives and used those memories as a reference of a life they did not want to repeat. Carolina recalled her sister's experience: *"my sister has two kids, she does not have a job and her husband works as a watchman. They scarcely have money to pay rent and food; […] I want to finish my studies, have a job and a house, and after that, have a child."* Other girls expressed why it was important for them to finish school and get a stable job, so their future children would not have to suffer from deprivations. Maria said: *"I want to finish high school, then have my own salon and work as a hairdresser. I'd like to have a kid when I reach a stable life, so that he or she can enjoy a good life."* Based on a previous personal experience with a former partner, Laura said that she did not want to depend on men's economic support: *"I will only move in with a man if I have a job and he has a job as well. Thus we could buy things together and in case we break up, we would split our belongings in half."* In the girls' minds there are new conceptions of how to construct their realities. As a result of their experiences in the armed groups and their exposure to life in a city, many of these girls have changed their minds with respect to the traditional role that women may play in Colombia, especially in rural areas:

> *"In the city we discover so many things that in the countryside one never imagines. Women in the countryside only think of finding a husband, having children and working in the crops. They do not study […]. Look at my mom. She is thirty years*

old and she had me at the age of fifteen. Then she had my brother and now she has three more kids", said Monica.

Now that they have more opportunities, their plans are more ambitious. They still consider having children as an important goal in their lives, but most of them plan to have them after living other experiences first. Monica suggests that *"having a child at this stage in life prevents us from living many things."* Girls like Monica realised that their studies may make it capable for them to get a job, receive a salary, and be more independent and autonomous to make decisions. If these same opportunities that exist in the city existed in the countryside, the girls would remain in the country because they value their rural areas. Unfortunately the state only offers primary and high school in these areas; very few villages have universities. According to my experience as a Colombian, this is another reason why many rural girls - not only former child soldiers - despite longing to go back to their towns, prefer to stay in the city and go to college.

Nursing and social work are among the academic programs they would like to pursue. While serving as child soldiers many of the girls learnt how to give first aid support to their comrades, along with other nursing activities. For this reason some girls want to improve their nursing skills through formal education so that they may use them professionally during their lives as civilians. Some of them would prefer to study social work as a positive way for them to assist other youth who also have lived in challenging contexts. Others wish to study architecture, systems engineering, law, and forensic medicine. Since completing an undergraduate program takes time, some of the girls who desire to go to college think of making use of the skills they are developing in the vocational programs, to make a living while they finish their professional studies. Maria plans to have her own salon; such a goal displays her sense of autonomy and her desire of independence. Monica would prefer to work in the textiles industry while she follows her dream of studying nursing at the University of Antioquia in the city of Medellin.

When the girls think of their future, they do not forget about their families at any moment. Not even those who suffered from domestic violence neglect their families - the girl who was raped is not even an exception, because her father does not live with her mother anymore; she really cares about her mother and siblings. All of the girls want to economically support their relatives when their incomes allow them to do it. It is

interesting how these girls visualise themselves not living in the same house with their parents and siblings, but living independently with or without a partner. In the Colombian culture it is very common that young people live with their parents until they get married or until they finish their undergraduate studies and get a stable job. Since these girls already had the experience of living far from their relatives, it is difficult for some of them to think of living with their families in the same physical space. Although they are determined to support their families, most of them know they will do it from an independent living environment. The girls want a radical change in their lives, and they want to impact their relatives' lives as well. Furthermore, as previously indicated, there are girls who desire to bring about change not only for themselves and their relatives, but also for others who suffered similar experiences. Catalina is a great example of someone who wants to be an agent for the development of other youth:

> *"I would like to work with people who were involved in armed groups and then demobilised. I think that if I teach people like them, they will realise: 'if she was like me and now she is where she is, why wouldn't I be capable of doing the same?'"*

Taking part in a process of reintegration that is offering these girls more resources than they have ever had access to in their lives, Catalina has been developing her capacity to identify her interests and how those interests are interconnected to the interests of others. That is part of the process that Rowlands (1997) defines as empowerment (p. 14). Catalina is recognised by the staff and by their peers as one of the leaders at the CAE. As a capable leader and role model, she is going beyond the reconstruction of her life and is visualising herself helping others. From the perspective of Rowlands' (1997) dimensions of empowerment, Catalina's case demonstrates how interrelated these three dimensions - personal, relational and collective - are (p. 15). In the personal dimension, her confidence has helped her to re-think her position in society. She has learnt that her role does not have to be passive, that instead of being limited to obey others, she can have an active role and participate in the decisions that affect her life. Consequently, in the relational dimension, she has been re-shaping her relationships with others. She reconciled her differences with her mother and her brothers. They all know that the autonomy that now

characterises her and the new opportunities she is enjoying, have led her to change her aspirations. Going to college, for instance, is a new goal that she did not consider before; now she says she wants to study social work. Moreover, as a leader, she has realised that she can make changes that impact not only her and her relatives' lives, but the lives of others in her community. She will most likely face the biggest challenge in the collective dimension, where a wider social structure plays a part. Working together as a community and making decisions that can transform social relationships and undo negative social constructions is a commitment of both Catalina as an individual and her community. Only structural changes in society and a proper institutional support will allow girls to be active participants of their development and be the support for the development of others.

The great challenge for the national institutions, which are in charge of leading the DDR program in which these girls are participating, is to guarantee them that once they leave the CAE they will be able to count on proper social, political, and economic conditions and find the opportunities they are expecting in order to reconstruct their lives. Additionally, society has the challenge of accepting and welcoming these boys, girls, women and men who demobilise and reintegrate into a civilian life. "The lack of opportunities limits the possibilities they have to build a life" (Acosta, Agbrysch & Góngora, 2007, p. 12). If girls do not find the conditions and opportunities they need to have a successful and sustainable reintegration into society, they would be in danger to be re-recruited or get involved in illegal activities that would attempt against their security, their freedoms, their capacities and their dignity. Within the program they are being assisted to heal their past and being prepared to make a future. Disappointment will result in a loss of hope and a re-victimisation of these minors who are doing their best to return to society as society itself demands.

The girls at the CAE are in a crucial stage in their lives that if properly addressed by the state, will have a great impact on the future trajectory of their lives and the lives of many people around them. Society and especially the state should not miss the chance to promote the conditions not only for these girls to succeed in their process of reintegration, but also for the wider social impact they could encourage. The next chapter explore the effectiveness of the current institutional response to these girls and what challenges the program still faces.

CHAPTER 6   IS THE COLOMBIAN DDR PROCESS

RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF FORMER GIRL SOLDIERS?

As stated by the National Council on Economic and Social Policy (CONPES by its acronym in Spanish), since DDR programming in Colombia is being developed while the armed conflict is still ongoing, the Colombian case is atypical when compared to some other cases in the world[3] (CONPES 3554, 2008, p. 3). Furthermore, DDR in Colombia has been a learning process in that the first stages did not contemplate a program that could have applied to any person who decided to abandon an armed group. On the contrary, the plan to assist demobilised individuals was the result of very specific peace talks, so the benefits only applied to those groups that had previously participated in negotiations, and had agreed to collectively demobilise (ODDR, 2010, p. 5). After several demobilisation experiences, in 2006 the national government decided to create the High Advisory Office for Reintegration, now known as the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR) (ODDR, 2010, p. 7). This agency is responsible for the process of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of all the adults who collectively or individually demobilise in the country.

In the case of minors, the ICBF is the institution in charge of the development of programs for the prevention of child recruitment and the protection of children who were involved in armed groups (ODDR, 2009, p. 27). First, Law 418 of 1997 granted the ICBF the responsibility for assisting demobilised children. Then Law 782 of 2002 designated this institution as responsible for the creation of the "Specialised Program for Assistance of Children and Adolescents no longer involved with Armed Groups" (p. 30). The ACR, although mainly works with demobilised adults, also accompanies and supports the work of the ICBF when defining policies and strategies to address the issue of child soldiers in Colombia (ODDR, 2011, p. 5).

According to Aguirre (2002), the identification and comprehension of the specific characteristics of the Colombian armed conflict was the main objective of these national

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[3] The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is another atypical case. Despite the formal end of the second civil war in 2003, several armed groups are still promoting violence and affecting DRC's citizens (The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, 2013b, p. 4). In the meanwhile, both national government and non-governmental organisations are working on the design and implementation of peacebuilding mechanisms such as DDR programs (Hayman, 2013, p. 18).

institutions in charge of DDR programming. The aim was to design a program which was coherent with the local context, instead of copying a model that responded to conflict dynamics elsewhere in the world (p. 123). Domestic violence was identified as a key issue that affected children in the context of the Colombian armed conflict. Aguirre highlights that, in the private sphere, child abuse, sexual abuse, violence between spouses and family breakdown have great impact on children's emotions and influence their decision to join an armed group. In the public sphere, social violence such us killing, robbery, and drug trafficking also play a part as violent phenomena that surround the Colombian armed conflict (p. 124). Therefore, the risks children run before and after leaving the armed group are not only related to the armed group itself, but also with the environment of violence and criminality that is present in the Colombian society.

The "Specialised Program for Assistance of Children and Adolescents no longer involved with Armed Groups" in Colombia is the name of the plan of assistance specially designed for minors. They are seen as subjects of rights, hence, under the status of victims of the armed conflict, the main goal of the program is the re-establishment of their rights. Aguirre (2002) argues that as subjects of rights, minors are recognised as individuals with unique lives and concrete realities (p. 114). Therefore, the program does consider the promotion of children as political, social and economic subjects who are able to reconstruct their lives and be self-sufficient as an essential factor (Acosta, Agbrysch & Góngora, 2007, p. 13).

According to the ICBF, the "Specialised Program for Assistance of Children and Adolescents no longer involved with Armed Groups" program entails four main stages: the first one is the reception of the minor, including identification, and physical and psychological diagnosis. The second one, and most critical, is the intervention stage. The third one is the preparation for the minor to leave the program; and finally, the follow-up led by the ICBF once the minor finishes the program (ICBF, concepto 11 de 2012, 003301). The intervention stage of the program has several components: 1) The health and nutrition component, where the minor is provided with health and nutritional assistance according to his/her specific needs; 2) The psychosocial component, in which the aim is to promote the personal, family, and social development of minors and to help them reach emotional stability; 3) The pedagogical component for minors to continue

their academic preparation and their education on social values; 4) The cultural and social cohabitation component, through which minors work on their social skills and their social imageries; 5) The family component which involves the active participation of minors' relatives in their process of reintegration[4]; 6) The management component, through which national institutions create strategic alliances that facilitate minors' reintegration into society and give them the opportunity to improve their quality of life; and 7) the legal component which aims to guarantee minors' constitutional rights (CONPES 3554, 2008, p. 35). Regarding the legal component, it is relevant to note that, compared to demobilised adults and to other minors who infract the law, ex-child soldiers have a social and juridical differential treatment (Defensoría del Pueblo 2002 as cited in ODDR, 2009, p. 27). The Childhood and Adolescent Code establishes that the Office of the Attorney General of Colombia has the faculty to dismiss cases of minors' penal prosecution, if their acts of violence occurred while being part of an armed group - except in cases of genocide and serious violations of humanitarian law by individuals above 14 years old. This code also states the prohibition of interrogation and use of demobilised minors in military intelligence by the public force (p. 27).

With regard to the way the ICBF implements its DDR program, two modalities exist: the institutional attention modality and the socio-familial attention modality. Under the first, minors are sent to a transitory institution where their identification process is done and their psycho-affective state and their family situation is assessed. Then they are allocated in one of the three Specialised Attention Centres (CAE), where they begin their process of socialisation and reestablishment of family bonds as well as their academic and vocational preparation. They can stay at the CAE until they turn 18 years old; after that, they have the opportunity to continue their process of reintegration with the ACR (Procuraduría General de la Nación – UNICEF 2006, as cited in ODDR, 2009, p. 30). Under the socio-familial attention modality, minors can go either to a "mentor home" or a "foster home". At a "mentor home" the minor lives with a volunteer family who is previously trained by ICBF on how to guide the person while offering him/her an environment of affection and support. At a "foster home", the minor goes back to his/her

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[4] When minors do not count on their relatives' support, they are helped to assimilate such a reality and are assisted on the process of finding alternative models for the construction of social networks.

real family. The ICBF has regional branches of support that offer these families psychological counselling during the process of reintegration of their sons or daughters (Ministerio del Interior y de Justicia 2007, as cited in ODDR, 2009, p. 32).

It is important to highlight that the ICBF is not the direct entity that implements the program for the reestablishment of children's and adolescents' rights. Instead, this institution contracts the services of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's) through public tender bidding processes (ODDR, 2009, p. 28). These NGO's must fulfill the requirements of the program in most of the areas that were previously mentioned: pedagogy, psychological counselling, reestablishment of family bonds, and plans which facilitate income generation for economic and social reintegration (Aguirre, 2002, p. 123). The ICBF supervises, accompanies and advises the NGO's that are selected.

As part of the strategy for the prevention of child-recruitment, in 2012 the national government created the Intersectoral Commission on the Prevention of Recruitment and Sexual Abuse of Boys, Girls and Adolescents by Groups Organised Outside the Law (Decreto 0552, 2012). Additionally, the Attorney General Office supports this strategy through the operation of the Attention Centres for Victims of Sexual Assault (CAIVAS) and the Attention Centres for Victims of Domestic Violence (CAVIF). These centres offer psychological, medical, social and juridical assistance to sexual assault and domestic violence victims and their families (Attorney General of Colombia, n.d., para. 6). At present, the commitment of the Colombian national authorities to the reintegration of former child soldiers into society is remarkable. In previous experiences the national government, lacking an institutional plan, had to face unexpected events of demobilisation of minors like the one that occurred in 1997 when the ELN guerrilla group handed over seven child soldiers, who were participating in its group, to them (ODDR, 2009, p. 29). Or the one in 2006 when the negotiating parties, despite the available information on the presence of child soldiers in the paramilitary groups, did not define a specific protocol for assisting them once the paramilitary structures demobilised. Consequently, the majority of children stayed out of the demobilisation programs designed for this armed group (Springer, 2012, p. 53). Therefore, it is important to recognise the great effort of the Colombian Government currently in defining a plan of

action for the children who leave an armed group and also for assigning human and economic resources in order to implement the plan.

However, there are still some elements that should be taken into account when defining DDR policies and delegating responsibilities. CONPES (2008), for instance, recognise some of the failures present in the national policy of reintegration. This institution points out that in some cases, the social policies and the state entities which execute them do not acknowledge the specific characteristics of some minorities who are also subject of social reintegration. Women, children, afro-Colombians, and indigenous people are among these minorities. CONPES states that the policy is not adjusted to the imagery and life expectations of these people; therefore, there is a lack of alternative plans that may meet their needs (p. 24).

What CONPES highlights, was also identified during fieldwork. There are still some elements which may negatively affect the process of reestablishment of both boys' and girls' rights as well as their reintegration into society. Some of the issues identified, derived from the fact that the ICBF does not directly implement the program, but some NGO's do it instead, as is the case of Ciudad Don Bosco in Medellin. Although the ICBF defined specific policies and indicators on how to address the reintegration process of children, the NGO's define the way they will provide these children with shelter, clothing, food, education, vocational training, and psychological counselling, among others. Therefore, the way the CAE in Medellin operates, may differ from the way other CAE's in the country do it. On the positive side, it is essential for the teams who work with these children to have flexibility in their interventions, since every individual may present different needs. Besides, it gives these teams the opportunity to adapt their program to the local context. It would be wrong to count on a strict blueprint applicable to every child, ignoring his/her particular story and context. However, the freedom these NGO's have to act and guide the children's reintegration process does not guarantee the properness and effectiveness of their actions. The ICBF constantly monitors NGO's work, but beyond that, it would be ideal to have greater team work among the parties involved in this process, so the CAE's do not have to work as isolated entities among each other. On the contrary, working as a team may allow them to figure out better practices to be implemented in the program.

These NGO's have to handle diverse issues derived from the work with former child soldiers and, unfortunately, the ICBF and the other relevant state institutions may not always be available to support them. Security is probably the issue of greatest concern. The monetary resources that are assigned to the NGO's are not sufficient for them to implement a security scheme that prevent children and the staff who work with them from persecutions or attacks by the armed groups. Although children are far from the areas where they operated as child soldiers, as mentioned previously, it is possible for the armed groups to find them. Additionally, the budget limits the ability of these NGO's to hire a professional team able to properly assist minors. The attention to boys' and girls' psychological needs undoubtedly requires an experienced group of psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers. In the specific case of the CAE in Medellin, these minors receive good psychological counselling and support; however, the finances do not cover the expenses of a psychiatrist at the CAE. When needed, girls and boys have to be sent to the location of the psychiatrist's office; unfortunately, when they present emotional reactions which immediately require psychiatric attention, the staff does not have the means to adequately respond at the CAE. During these kinds of episodes, the integrity of all boys and girls, as well as the staff, is compromised. These are issues that could be better address if the ICBF worked much closer to these organisations.

Another aspect of concern for these NGO's - which deserve deeper analysis - has to do with the lack of support by the ICBF on matters of differential treatment, specifically on gender strategies, despite the obligation that law grants the state entities. Law 448 of 2011, for instance, makes reference, to the need of having a differential treatment that addresses minorities' needs:

"Differential Approach: there are populations with particular characteristics as result of their age, gender, sexual orientation and disability situation. For this reason, the measures established by this law on humanitarian assistance, attention, and reparation should be based on such an approach" (Law 448 of 2011, Article 13 as cited in Serrano-Murcia, 2013, p. 53)

On the one hand, it is relevant the acknowledgment, at a legal level, of the importance of policies and programs that recognise differences among populations, and

promote the inclusion of minorities. Nevertheless, the work is not completely done if the initiatives remain on legal papers without being reflected at a practical level. Activities related to gender are among the items that the ICBF evaluates when auditing these NGO's; but these teams do not receive any training on how to structure programs that promote the reflection on identities, and social imaginaries of masculinities and femininities. There is no rationale for the fact that the ICBF performs just as a guard of what NGO's do regarding gender education, when these organisations do not have the human and economic resources to properly respond. The ICBF is the state institution responsible for the protection of children and adolescents; therefore the framework that guide initiatives and plans of action should come from the ICBF itself.

In this regard, the ACR has more advanced process working with demobilised women and men; although some of their strategies were not well addressed, at present they are implementing better strategies. They initially based their work on the legal document CONPES 3554 of 2008, which considered women as unifying forces and promoters of family units. Since they played a key role on convincing ex-combatants to stay in the DDR program, they became key actors in the successful reintegration process of their partners. Trying to highlight women's key roles in DDR processes as nurturers of home, CONPES 3554 and the ACR outlined a family strategy, but overlooked women's expectations and desires. The interest of the others - partners and children - were placed ahead of their own interests (Serrano-Murcia, 2013, p. 78). In 2010, the ACR changed the strategy, with the aim of transforming "aspects of the male and female identities that obstruct participants' chance to develop a life based on their rights and responsibilities and without violence" (ACR, 2011 as cited in Serrano-Murcia, 2013, p. 78). The strategy aims to promote non-violent relationships in the private and public spheres, to strengthen women's income generation sources, and to reinforce women's leadership capacity and political participation. Women attend workshops where they are provided with pedagogical tools and psycho-social assistance during the process (p. 79). As stated by Serrano-Murcia, the reintegration process led by the ACR is at a transformatory stage (p. 86). They are working on the recognition of women's stories, experiences and ideas, in order to include their needs and expectations in their DDR program. Unfortunately, these kinds of actions are not being adopted by the ICBF yet. To this effect, the National

Centre of Historical Memory, in its report on Gender, Age and Ethnic Approaches (2013), urges the national government to include gender strategies in all the reintegration processes that are being carried out, and makes specific reference to the ICBF (p. 88). Not only should the ACR assign resources for the execution of gender strategy activities (p. 87), the ICBF should do the same as well.

The emphasis on the analysis of girls' experiences and gender roles, based on a gender approach, is essential in the process of girls' reestablishment of rights. As has been illustrated throughout this thesis, the girls in this study lived diverse experiences that made them adopt different roles in the social groups they interacted with. Given the economic and social deprivations they faced, these girls had to grow up and take on adult roles prematurely, most of them, in communities where patriarchal traditions were predominant. Then, they got involved in armed groups, and in spite of the change of roles in a system of apparently - and obligatory - gender equality, they kept assuming identities and performing duties of adults. Now that they are undergoing the program of reintegration, they face a new redefinition of roles. Mazurana and Eckerbom Cole (2013) argue that during a DDR process, there is a transition where each former combatant has to redefine his/her role as an individual in society by adopting femininities and masculinities that are different to the ones they adopted in the military structure (p. 196). In many cases, ex-soldiers have to go back to the roles they had before joining the armed group, since they have to get immersed into the dynamics of the communities to which they belong. They have to re-adopt "their societies' dominant notions of masculinity and femininity, and these notions may be not congruent with those that were desired and nurtured inside the armed group" (Hale 2001 as cited in Mazurana & Eckerbom Cole, 2013, p. 197).

The girls at the CAE are in a period of transition in which they are being prepared for their reintegration into society. At the moment, they have not gone back to their communities; therefore, they do not still know what role they would have to adopt when reintegrated. These girls are discovering a new world in which opportunities are at their disposal as never before; that is why their goals are ambitious. They have high expectations on the future life they devise; they are longing for going to college, then getting a stable job and finally have an independent life with or without a partner. Most

of them do not want to economically depend on their potential partner or having children at early age as commonly happens in their communities. The way they envision their future has changed.

The main question here is whether the state and the society will provide them with the conditions they need to make their dreams come true. Is the state offering enough academic opportunities for them to go to college? Will the labor market provide them with enough job offers for them to be economically self-sufficient? The academic setting is probably the most positive aspect, since the state guarantee these girls access to higher education either through the National Learning Service Institution (SENA) - which offers youth the possibility to pursue technical programs - or through public universities - where they can find professional programs. Regarding access to job offers, the situation is less positive. As stated by Villegas, social worker at the CAE in Medellin, when these boys and girls go to the labour market, they usually find job offers; nevertheless their wages do not meet their expectations. They have to work many hours for wages that are not commensurate with their effort (personal communication, March 2, 2014). This situation is exemplified by one case I observed during fieldwork. A young man who had finished the program at the CAE, decided to stay in the city where he had already found a job. However he quit his job, given that the money he could receive in the informal market was superior to the payment he was earning in the factory. Therefore, he decided to sell candies on the buses; today, that is the activity that is currently giving him the chance to make a living. Payments which do not meet the expectations of these girls may also affect their willingness to study, since they do not only need economic resources to cover their basic needs, but also to pay for the expenses derived from their studies - books, photocopies, and transportation.

If these girls do not manage to reconstruct an independent life in the city, where there are more academic and job opportunities, they would have to go back to the environments of poverty and violence in which they lived before. Therefore, they would probably have to re-adopt the traditional roles that are prevalent in their communities and that inhibit their capacity to make decisions by their own. The state is doing a great effort when designing and implementing children's DDR program, but the influence of these programmes has not reached the communities where these boys and girls lived. Firstly,

some areas are still the theatre of military operations of the armed conflict. Secondly, poverty and lack of opportunities greatly affect these regions where the presence of the state is still precarious. Unfortunately, girls have a greater chance to rebuild their lives in a way they ideally envision only if they stay in the city. For most of them, it means living far from their families and their roots. Nevertheless, it means, at the same time, the possibility to change their lives as they wish to and consequently, have more options to support their relatives and positively impact their quality of life.

In this regard, it is important for the state, represented by ICBF, to make more of an effort to create alliances with the private sector and the academy. The main objective would be the definition of strategies that facilitate the access of youth to well-paid jobs once they finish the program at the CAE, as well as after finishing their professional studies. If girls count on the necessary economic and social conditions for reconstructing their lives, their roles as agents of the development of others will be facilitated as well. The description given by Denov and Gervais (2002) regarding former girl soldiers in Sierra Leone applies to the girls in my study as well: "with their experience of agency, negotiation, resistance, and resourcefulness [these girls] are undoubtedly equipped with incredible potential to contribute to projects of reconstruction, peace, development, and security in the future" (p. 906). Based on their experiences, the girls I spoke with now have a more developed sense of solidarity and are willing to help their families and others who lived similar situations. In this sense, the report on the experiences of young ex-combatants who are undergoing a process of reintegration into society in Bogota city (Acosta, Agbrysch & Góngora, 2007) points out youth's capacity of participation in processes that impact their lives and strengthen their autonomy. The report reinforces the importance of considering minors' opinions on the DDR programs that are designed for them. The aim is, firstly, to identify the elements that are still limiting the exercise of their rights; secondly, to promote the possibility they have as agents of change through their participation in public decisions (p. 43).

When DDR planners do not comprehend the roles that both boys and girls played before and during their lives as soldiers, and do not analyse the changes they face when returning to a civilian life, the design of the program would scarcely meet the real needs of these individuals. Moreover, the chance for them to make themselves responsible for

their own future would be unlikely. The effectiveness of DDR programs depend on the response the state gives to the individuals who decide to participate in the process, willing to reintegrate into society. Therefore, the response to women's and girls' needs is essential (Mazurana & Eckerbom Cole, 2013, p. 202). The national government is taking actions on the inclusion of children in DDR planning as well as the inclusion of women and gender issues, which during former processes of reintegration did not happen. In the specific matter of gender strategies, the ACR has a more developed work with demobilised adults, compared to the work that the ICBF is doing. Therefore, as partner and advisor, the ACR should work together with the ICBF in order to formulate actions that promote the reflection on gender issues. Fortunately, at present, these institutions count on one more legal instrument which defines the national policy on gender equity and assigns new economic resources for its implementation during the period 2013 - 2016: CONPES 161 of 2013.

> *"The inclusion of gender analysis in public policies which may help to intervene and transform current social realities, cultural processes of gender identity construction, and social and sexual work division has been called the transversalisation of the gender approach in the performing of the State. This strategy of inclusion must attend to women's needs according to their gender roles, as well as to the satisfaction of their basic needs and improvement of their conditions of existence. Simultaneously, it aims to attend women's interests in relation to the overcoming of inequality, access to power and elimination of diverse types of discrimination and subordination. It aims to transform and empower their position in society"* (CONPES 161, 2013, p. 5)

According to this policy, the commitment of the state regarding the inclusion of gender analysis in their plans of action in favor of the Colombian society is clear. However, as previously mentioned, the formulation of policies are not enough; they should be reflected on the reality. For the ACR and the ICBF, this is a suitable moment to begin to create and implement actions that are coherent to the national policy on gender equity defined by CONPES. Taking into account that the number of girls and women who are undergoing the program for the reestablishment of rights is still low, it is easier for the Government to effectively implement their actions. Thus, they may be better prepared to receive a significant amount of boys, girls, men and women who would probably demobilise if peace talks with the FARC succeed.

CHAPTER 7   CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on the Human Security and Gender and Development (GAD) frameworks, this research sought to answer the research question: how do the experiences of girls before, during and after their lives as soldiers in Colombia shape their agency? The Human Security framework provides the conceptual tools to understand why war-affected women and children, individuals who are considered to be among the most vulnerable groups in society, is a security issue of great concern at both national and international levels. As Denov and Gervais (2007) point out, since individuals are at the centre of this approach, it is appropriate to carry out an analysis of the girls' "individual experiences of [in]security" (p. 904), with the aim of identifying the main constraints that were limiting the enjoyment of their freedoms and human capacities. Moreover, Fox (2004) states that based on Human Security policies, programs like Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) would better address the girls' needs that have been frequently overlooked in post-conflict situations (p. 476). However, it would be necessary that this framework had a deeper analysis on the type of individual who is in a situation of insecurity, more specifically a deeper gender analysis (Truong, Wieringa and Chhachhi, 2006, p. XXIV). As such, the GAD perspective and the concepts of agency and empowerment have been integrated into my study of the girls' lives and experiences. GAD facilitated the analysis of the specific issues that affected girls as part of a social structure where women, men, and boys interacted as well. Through this lens, it has been possible to look at girls' experiences within a context in which not only the interaction with other individuals, but also the disposal of resources and the relations of power significantly influenced the way the exercised their agency.

Throughout this thesis I have argued that in spite of these former girl-soldiers' age and experiences they were forced to live, they are not passive and defenceless individuals. On the contrary, they have a great capacity to cope with extreme conditions of life, exercise their agency and be agents of their own future. In this process, the state and society are essential factors as providers of the required legal, social, economic, and political conditions that girls need to reconstruct their lives, once they begin their process of reintegration. The conceptual contributions of the Human Security and GAD

frameworks, together with the data provided by the thirteen former-girl-soldiers to this research, have led me to draw the following conclusions:

The main source of girls' insecurity was the context of poverty and violence in both the private and the public spheres in which they lived: before making up part of an armed group, the participants of this research lived in a context of poverty. Most of them affirmed having experienced economic deprivations and lack of social opportunities that impacted their wellbeing as well as that of their relatives. The situation of inequality in Colombia has especially affected the rural areas where most of these girls came from. Additionally, poverty overlapped with another social issue that was prominent in these communities as well: violence. In the private sphere, domestic violence - physical abuse and sexual abuse - was a key aspect of the girls' lives. Unfortunately, family breakdown was the reality for many of them. Likewise, the inhabitants of these areas became immersed in the logistic functionality of the illegal armed groups and the drug trafficking business, so that illegal activities and crime became normal occurrences in their day to day lives. Consequently, supporting the armed groups and belonging to them was not an unusual choice for making an income. According to girls' stories, none of them were abducted. All these girls saw, in the illegal military life, an alternative to avoid their immediate reality.

Although the status of victims of the armed conflict is irrefutable, girls' agency should not be overlooked: due to a context of poverty, violence and lack of opportunities which offer children very few options from which to choose, their recruitment into non-state armed forces is considered a coerced action under the Colombian law. For these reasons, child soldiers' legal status is that of victims of the armed conflict. Therefore, the law states that their rights must be re-established. Although the recognition of child soldiers as victims is appropriate and necessary, it should not result in the overlooking of their capacity to cope with extreme experiences and make choices within a context of constraints and few resources at their disposal. Moreover, the responsibility for their actions should also be considered to a certain extent. On the one hand, suggesting children leave behind their memories while in the armed groups, without reflecting on their actions and comprehending the negative consequences they provoked may cause them psychological side effects such us anguish and feelings of

solitude (Castro, 2002, p. 78). On the other hand, ignoring children's capacity to exercise their agency leads the DDR planners to design and implement programs that may not meet the real needs of these children. Children's actions are also a way of expressing themselves and communicating a message that the civil society and the state should read, interpret and respond to. Despite the influence of external social, political and economic factors, children have the capacity to autonomously deal with their past memories, present circumstances and future challenges.

The girls had the capacity to face their extreme experiences autonomously and exercise their agency: the girls demonstrated a great "capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion" (Long, 1992 as cited in Moser & Clark, 2005, p.5). Their instinctual sense of survival and protection allowed girls to make tough decisions in order to save their own lives, or the lives of their loved ones. An admirable capacity to resist violence gave some of them the courage to challenge their comrades or commanders while in the armed group. A desire for recognition and power motivated some others to support the armed group's fight and continue their participation with the aim of being valued and promoted to a commander position. The ability to negotiate granted them the possibility of access to privileges in the armed group and even increased their opportunity to abandon the group. Finally, now that they are undergoing a DDR program, an exceptional capacity to overcome obstacles and reach reconciliation is giving them the opportunity to change the course of their lives.

The girls argued that in the armed groups they belonged to (FARC and ELN), women and girls were not sexually abused. However, girls are forced to abort when they get pregnant: when the girls recounted their stories, the adult role of being sexual partners quickly came into view. When they were asked about sexual abuses, all of them affirmed that sexual abuses were forbidden in the FARC and the ELN guerrilla groups. Moreover, that those members who dared to rape a woman or a girl, were judged in a "war trial" and sentenced to death. Among the 13 participants, only two girls stated that if sexual abuses occurred, it was because any guerrilla member broke the rules. Twelve girls expressed anger when making reference to this issue; according to them, some people in Colombia, including mass media, assured that women and girls were raped in

the armed groups, when the reality was different. To them, it was very important to make it clear that they were not raped in the guerrilla. On the contrary, they were free to choose the partner they wanted to be with, and free to decide when they wanted to finish the relationship. Some girls expressed having had several relationships in the armed group, without any problem of being punished or stigmatised by their comrades or commanders. However, the decision of having a child did not depend on them. These girls expressed that getting pregnant was among their main fears while in the armed groups because they would have been forced to abort. For this reason, they did not consider the use of birth control methods as optional; for them, it was a must.

Girls are in constant redefinition of gender roles and the new world of opportunities that girls are discovering is leading them to devise different and more ambitious goals: the circumstances these girls lived made them go through a process in which, they were forced to take on very different gender roles in a very short time period. Before joining an armed group, they did not completely enjoy their role as girls in the school or the playground, because they were facing deprivations which limited their childhood process. Some of them had to find the way to survive the physical and sexual abuses; some others concentrated their efforts on helping their families with the acquisition of economic resources to survive. Besides, since all of them belonged to a social structure where male dominance was prominent, they learnt to follow the rules imposed by their fathers or step-fathers, and serve them once they arrived from work the same way their mothers did.

Once in the armed group, they kept following strict rules but only from the commanders who controlled the lives of all the male and female members of the group. In the new military environment, these girls realised that men and women had to take on the same roles and the same duties. As they highlighted, obedience and equality were the main rules. Traditional female behaviours turned into a more masculinised identity in which the rudeness of the role as soldiers must prevail.

At present, they have encountered a new world of opportunities at their disposal - after leaving the armed group. Shelter, health and nutrition, psychological counselling, education, and vocational training in an urban environment of non-violence showed them that life could be seen from other perspectives. They are still following rules as any other

individual in the civil society, but now they understand that if the rules are broken, the consequences derived do not entail violent punishments. Although they never stopped exercising their agency before or during their lives as soldiers, the conditions offered by the program give them more freedom to autonomously handle their experiences, reflect on their lives and make decisions. These girls have begun to devise more ambitious goals, based on the lessons they learnt in the past, the opportunities that are available to them and the freedom to think about their future the way they want to. They are visualising plans and goals that go beyond getting married and having children at an early age, which is the path that girls in the countryside commonly take - and that their families expect them to take - after finishing school.

Some of these girls want to actively participate in the process of reconstruction of their lives and impact the lives of others: some of these girls have realised that their role in society does not have to be a passive one; that they can actively participate in the process of reconstruction of their lives. For this reason, they are taking full advantage of the current benefits offered in the program, paying especial attention to their education and vocational training. Although in their minds to start a new independent life now would be ideal, they understand that the program is long and that they should reach some stages before leaving. Therefore, what they do at present, is to plan what they want for their own future and how they want to economically support their families. They feel that the opportunities they are having, may also help them in the near future to positively impact the lives of their relatives, who are still facing a situation of poverty and violence at their places of origin.

Besides the desire to impact their families' development, some girls go beyond by envisioning themselves as agents of development of people who lived similar experiences and need the support that they are having at the moment. Some of these girls acknowledge that their own cases may inspire and bring about changes for others. They do not resign themselves to act in their own favor, but want to promote a wider social impact. They keep going on in the process of empowerment in which not only individual and relational change is required, but also collective action that impact social structures (Young 1988 & Rowlands, 1997).

Girls' capacity to exercise agency challenges both the Colombian State and the Colombian society: in the process of empowerment, the role of the state as guarantor of rights and promoter of opportunities for vulnerable people, plays a crucial part. These girls have amazing intentions to actively participate in their own development and the developments of others by making choices that positively impact people's lives. They are being able to devise new goals because the national government is making a great effort - although some weaknesses persist - to provide them with the tools they require to face society and become adapted to society. However, if they have the tools, but once they go to the outside world, they do not find the conditions to make use of them, the re-victimisation of these minors would be a serious consequence.

Within the Specialised Attention Centre (CAE), the social and economic conditions for these children to live are guaranteed. Nevertheless, the social, political and economic conditions for these individuals to make decisions on their own in the outside world are not guaranteed, mainly, because poverty and inequality are issues that greatly impact Colombian society. These children will start competing with hundreds of citizens who are also looking for a stable job within the formal labour market, so that they can obtain the sufficient resources for making a living. Compared to regular citizens, they have a possible disadvantage which would be the potential social stigmatisation for having participated in the armed conflict as aggressors - although on a legal setting they are only seen as victims. On this matter, the state has another challenge, which is the responsibility of working with the civil society together with the victims and the perpetrators of the armed conflict in processes of reconciliation. It is relevant that both the state and the society welcome these children and allow them to access the opportunities they expect in order to reconstruct their lives. In this scenario, girls have an additional difficulty that has to do with the fact that, as a minority, they still do not have a differential treatment in the DDR process - despite the existence of the law. Therefore, their experiences and needs are being equalised to those of boys or overlooked all together. Girls require that their voices be heard and their particular experiences be taken into account in the DDR programming, so that the plans designed to support their reintegration into society, effectively meet their real needs and life expectations.

This thesis is based on the premise that girl soldiers are active agents in their lives. And that while their choices have, at times, been made within the context of severe constraints, their desire to actively participate in the reconstruction of their lives is an indication of their capacity to devise a future. Based on the experiences lived by the thirteen former girl soldiers who participated in my research, I demonstrated why agency plays a key role in their lives, despite the absolute need to keep considering children as victims of armed conflicts - as national and international laws demand. Through the exercise of their agency, these girls managed to face a constant redefinition of gender roles and life expectations before, during and after their lives as soldiers.

The importance of recognising girls' agency and hearing their voices resides in the urgent necessity of the national institutions in charge of the DDR planning to offer these girls a program that effectively meets their real needs. They are girls who will soon become adults and, as agents of their own development, are devising a positive future in their lives. Disappointment will result in a loss of hope and a re-victimisation of these minors who are doing their best to return to society as society itself demands.

This research also exposed unexpected aspects of child soldiering issues unique to the Colombian case that deserve further analysis. For that reason, I recommend the consideration of three main avenues for future research. First, the impact that FARC's and ELN's gender equality measures - in terms of the responsibilities that members must take on - has on men, women, boys and girls, when they demobilise from these armed groups and face a new reality in society.

Second, considering the cases of sexual abuse, sexual slavery, HIV/AIDS, and reproductive health problems suffered by child soldiers in other countries, what are the differences and similarities on how guerrilla leaders perceive and control their troops' sexuality? Why are not sexual abuses, including rapes, common practices inside the Colombian guerrilla groups? Instead, instances of sexual abuse are addressed with the aggressors being punished with a 'war trial' and ultimately a death sentence.

Finally, a deeper analysis is required into the reasons behind why former child soldiers are generally not rejected by their own communities when they leave the armed groups. In this realm, it would also be important to analyse the exceptional case of indigenous children. According to some experiences at the CAE, these children are

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excluded and marginalised by their communities when they get involved in armed groups. Consequently, these children result in a situation of extreme vulnerability. They face greater challenges during their process of reintegration into society, especially because when they are rejected by their communities, their only alternatives involve living in completely new environments in which they cannot even speak their native language.

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